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This dissertation examined the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) in two rural school districts in south central North Carolina. Federal legislation requiring an increase in school system accountability included the expectation for implementing differentiating levels of academic intervention for struggling students. Implementation structure and pragmatics differ from district to district as the process design remains with local education units. The filtering of federal legislative expectations to state-level administration and subsequently to school system and ultimately school site leadership is a long journey that can result in varied interpretations. The communication of methodology and expectations from district-level administration to school-level practitioners is crucial for effective implementation. Therefore, an understanding of and a focused vision for Response to Intervention implementation is essential throughout district and school leadership (Kratochwill, Valopiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007).

This dissertation explored the district-level to school-level facilitation of RtI implementation in two rural but very different districts in south central North Carolina, both identified to demonstrate stellar RtI implementation processes. Individual staff members were interviewed at the district and school-level (elementary, middle, and high) using a structured interview protocol to explore this process of implementation. The responses were then analyzed using a theme matrix. A consistent set of core strategies, practices, and beliefs were found in schools in the two districts, although facilitation of the expectations from district to school-level differed significantly and impacted the

breadth and levels of implementation. Monitoring the fidelity of the process remained at the school level. The results reinforce the barriers that rural districts confront in complying with federal mandates.

INTERVENTIONS WITH GOOD INTENTIONS: EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION
OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION IN TWO RURAL
SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

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Albert Schweitzer said, “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” I owe the completion of my graduate studies to a multitude of unique and special individuals who have sparked my flame when challenges interrupted this long journey of academic pursuit and dedicate this research to an extended group. Most importantly, I appreciate the support and tolerance of my husband, Larry, and daughters, Jenny Leigh and Aspen, who saw beyond an ill humor and paper-laden family room to my goal of a completed project. The cheerleading of co-workers, both past and present, has enabled me to keep the target in sight, while providing encouragement and goal-setting along the way. The school staff members of District Lots of Land and District Small Places who allowed me to intrude into their daily activities to learn more about the implementation of one facet of school reform were amazing, and I am indebted to their time and to their honesty. Probably the most relevant of support came from Dr. Carl Lashley, who, as one of the most dedicated educators I have ever met, had to fan my flame on more than one occasion.

Nelson Mandela noted that, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” My parents and family supported education throughout my lifetime, and for instilling its relevance to me, I am forever grateful. Buddha noted that, “Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.” The implementation of

educational reform initiatives often seems daunting, but the light of improvement is that which we all seek to share with this generation and the next.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The federal mandates of the No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) focus on establishment of effective instruction within schools (Lujan, Love, & Collins, 2008). These laws focus on the delivery of quality regular instruction as well as the use of focused and skill-based interventions presented in increasingly intensive tiers to struggling students. The legislation does permit schools the use of this process of intervention delivery rather than using the traditional method for identification of students under exceptional education programs as having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The Response to Intervention process can simultaneously meet the needs of students in a preventative format but does not rule out the use of previously used methods of SLD identification.

Specifically, the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) indicated that:

a) when determining whether a child has a specific learning disability . . . local educational agency shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability, and b) In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures. (P.L. 108-446 614(b)(6)(a and b))

In North Carolina, the traditional method for identification of SLD, known as the discrepancy model, identifies a student as SLD based on a significant difference between the measured intellect of a student as compared to measures of academic achievement using standardized measures. Many criticisms of the discrepancy model have been documented including arbitrary labeling for some students and not for others and a *wait to fail* approach for the identification of students (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). A dilemma is that IDEIA fails to include any specific regulations regarding the RtI framework, which allows state and local educational units to determine their own regulations (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This has resulted in a lack in clarity, and inconsistency about exactly what RtI is and how it is to be implemented (Hollenbeck, 2007).

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a systemic process that can be used across instructional settings and involves “implementing high quality, scientifically-validated instructional practices based on learner needs, monitoring student progress, and adjusting instruction based on student response” (Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 7). School systems are encouraged to use a universal screening process, a baseline measurement of sorts that could identify students in need of more intensive instruction. The focus of this assessment is usually in reading skills. With an identified area of deficit for a struggling student’s academic skill acquisition, interventions that are research-based are implemented. Student response to the interventions is monitored through ongoing assessment to determine effectiveness. When improvement is not shown, the

interventions intensify in frequency or length. When response continues to fall below average, the student may be potentially referred for a comprehensive psycho-educational evaluation and ultimately identified as possessing a Specific Learning Disability (Bender & Shores, 2007).

Therefore, the intent of RtI is to focus on the quality of instruction the child is receiving to ensure that the student's academic struggles are not a function of weak educational strategies or instruction. The emphasis of Response to Intervention (RtI) focuses on a strong core curriculum and instruction existing in the school setting. Only then can a specific student-based intervention be implemented, changing the over-riding perspective of the process from one of an individual deficit model to a more systems-based perspective. This impacts schools in a different way than the traditional SLD exceptional education eligibility procedures.

The Problem

Response to Intervention due to its systems approach requires the development and progression of existing educational practices and organizational perspectives (Tilly, 2008). It is essential for school district and specific school communities to be considered and understood in implementation frameworks, since there are so many contextual variables to be evaluated (Chard et al., 2008). Similarly, rather than working in fragmented departments within a school or district—regular education, special education, and interventionists—the RtI process requires collaborative efforts to bring about improved student achievement. Educators must embrace the RtI process as a systemic

perceptual change and understand that it is more than a prerequisite for movement into the exceptional education program. If they do not, “they will neither become more successful in their efforts to help students learn nor eliminate the unhealthy and unnecessary distinction between general education and special education and the staff who serve them” (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008, p. 271).

The Problem Defined in Context

Response to Intervention developed as a function of the passage of two federal pieces of educational legislation. In 2002, the Reading First program was introduced in conjunction with the No Child Left Behind Legislation. The focused intent was to provide a mechanism to increase literacy skills in students. The federal government actually sets grade-level expectations for reading acquisition in public schools.

No Child Left Behind stated President Bush’s unequivocal commitment to ensuring that every child can read by the end of third grade. To accomplish this goal, the new Reading First initiative would significantly increase the Federal investment in scientifically-based reading instruction programs in early grades. (U.S Department of Education, 2004, p. 2)

The subsequent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004 reinforced the RtI philosophy by permitting its implementation to aid in the identification of students possessing specific learning disabilities. However, states and local school systems were left to struggle with defining the implementation process. “Because RtI was put forth more as an idea than as a plan in the special education law, administrators were left to create their own models of it”

(Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 73). States and local education districts remain at different stages of development. Effective implementation can take minimally two to three years of hard work and consistent planning related to school culture as well as the teaching and learning of new philosophical concepts that can become translated into effective core instructional practices resulting in improving outcome data over four to seven years (NCDPI, 2011). School districts need to evaluate practices and procedures during implementation so that they can be amended to fit into the RtI framework.

RtI is a model as opposed to a specified program. Therefore, due to the conceptual outline provided to districts as opposed to specific procedures and guidelines, implementation of RtI with integrity is sometimes inconsistent and questionable. Without specific rules to follow, districts and/or schools must develop their own. This requires reliance on local leadership to provide direction to staff on the specifics of implementing RtI as a method of school reform. Researchers investigating successful school reform efforts identified leadership, professional development, staff acceptance or buy in, time for collaboration, and efficient and effective use of personnel as crucial to the implementation of change initiatives successfully (Harlacher & Siler, 2011). Therefore, implementation of RtI requires leadership to coordinate the multiple facets of this reform initiative.

RtI Implementation in North Carolina

Similarly, North Carolina provided a framework but little specific guidance towards procedures for implementation of RtI. The North Carolina Department of

Instruction (NCDPI) implemented and tweaked its guidance surrounding RtI by describing a problem-solving process of implementation over the past few years (see Figure 1).

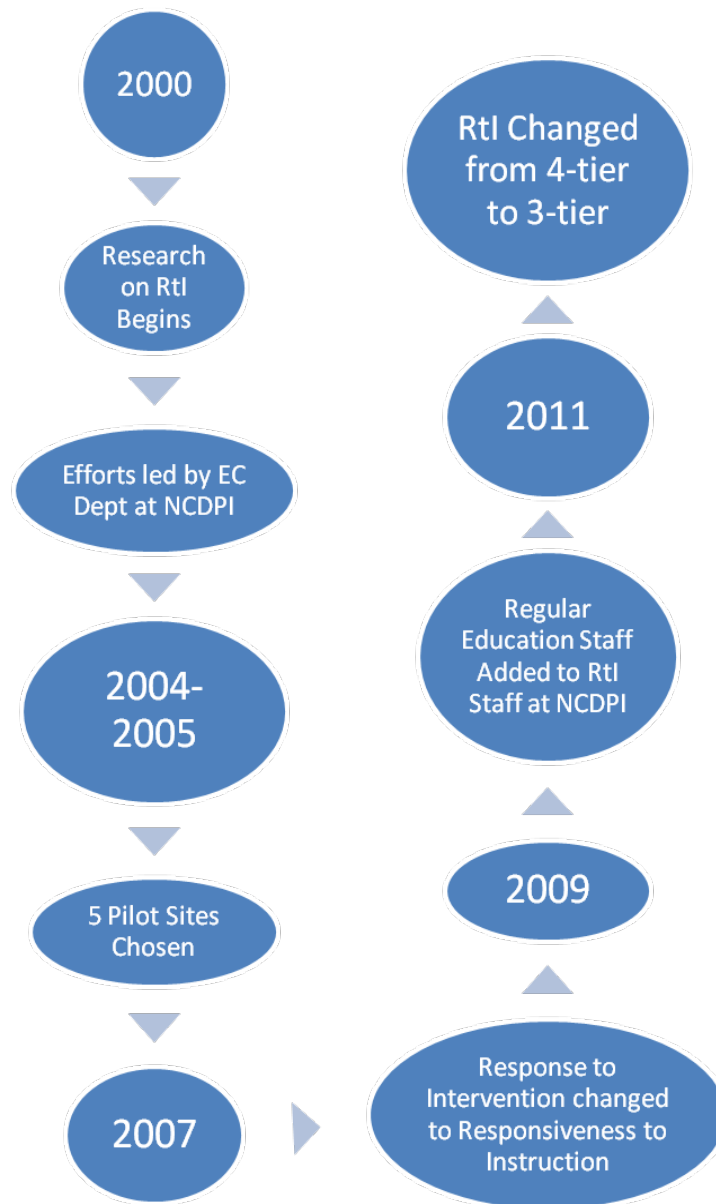


Figure 1. The Timeline of North Carolina State RtI Roll-Out.

Its initial guidance to school districts was that “problem-solving is defined as a process that includes systematic analysis of a student’s behavior or academic difficulties that uses analysis, and any assessment activities, to provide the foundation for a planned, systematic set of interventions” (NCDPI, 2009, p. 1). North Carolina began investigating RtI in the year 2000 and eventually rolled out its version, which consisted of a four-tier model in 2004–2005 to five pilot sites across the state through the Exceptional Education Department at NCDPI. In 2007, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction opted to amend the federal version of Response to Intervention (federal RtI) by naming the process Responsiveness to Instruction (state of North Carolina RtI). Their basic premise was that the focus of intervention provision was through direct instruction.

Therefore, in this document, when referring to *federal RtI*, it will be designated as such; when referring to the state of North Carolina’s version (Responsiveness to Instruction), it will be designated as *state RtI*. The Department of Public Instruction further refined their framework guidance by describing the North Carolina version of RtI.

NC Responsiveness to Instruction (NCRtI) is a multi-tiered framework which promotes school improvement through engaging, high quality instruction by using a team approach to guide educational practices, using a problem solving model based on data to address student needs and maximize growth for all. (NCDPI, 2011, p. 20)

In 2009, North Carolina revamped its focus of the state RtI process by moving its supervision to the regular education portion of the Department of Public Instruction.

Then, in the 2011–2012 school year, NCDPI opted to change its model from a four-tier to a three-tier model. This succession of changes and modifications in the state-led implementation process led to confusion and transitioning ownership across school systems in North Carolina.

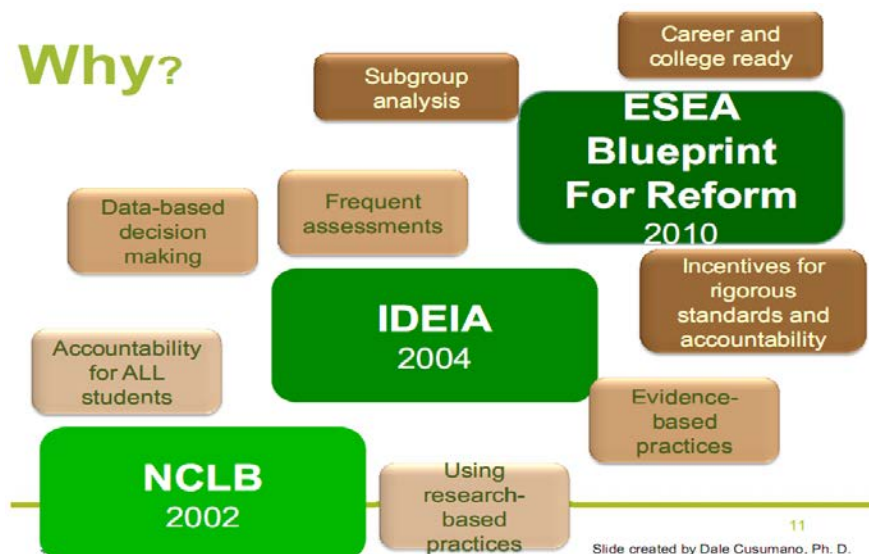
The RtI Action Network (n.d.) indicates that

for RtI implementation to work well, the following essential components must be implemented with fidelity and in a rigorous manner: high quality, scientifically-based classroom instruction. . . . Ongoing student assessment. . . . Tiered instruction. . . . [and] Parent involvement. (para. 2)

More specifically, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) identified the development of its RTI framework from the 2002 No Child Left Behind legislation and the 2004 re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA), culminating with the federal 2010 document *Blueprint for Reform* as the anchors of the change stimulus.

Cusumano crafted a graphic to capture the image of this process for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (2011) overview to state RtI. The graphic (see Figure 2) demonstrates the relevant variables related to the evolution of educational reform that includes: accountability for ALL students, data-based decision making, frequent assessments, subgroup analysis, career and college ready, the use of research-based practices, evidence-based practices, and incentives for rigorous standards and accountability.

Figure 2 is a pictorial image of the legislative influences that have set expectations for educational instruction and outcomes throughout the past 12 years. The evolution of federal legislative mandates from the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2010) have impacted education practices and accountability outcomes. A focus on the systemic use of quality instructional practices and prevention-based intervention strategies with research and evidence-bases within a tiered framework are outlined. In addition, the expectation is to use data-based decision-making to drive instruction which should theoretically meet the needs of all learners. This framework guides teachers in meeting the needs of struggling students, while transforming how schools operate.



Source: NCDPI RtI Training Powerpoint retrieved from: <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/curriculum/responsiveness/rtimaterials/overview.pdf>

Figure 2. The Focus of Response to Intervention.

Upon initial implementation of state RtI, North Carolina adhered to a four-tiered model, supporting pilot districts in their development. However in January 2012, in a Dear Colleagues letter, a change in philosophy was made public:

Over the past eighteen months, the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) has revisited its vision and mission for the NC Responsiveness to Instruction initiative (NC RtI). During this time, a committee with broad agency representation conducted focus groups across the state to gather stakeholder input and developed recommendations for a revised definition and the critical components for NC RtI. The committee also made a recommendation, based on stakeholder input and information from other states, to transition from a four-tier to a three-tier RtI school improvement model. These recommendations were then vetted through the NC RtI Steering Committee and approved by senior NCDPI leadership. With this new vision, RtI can be used as a framework to streamline initiatives and ensure all students are career and college ready. (NCDPI, 2012b)

This major framework change led to a transitional period for even those school districts that were piloting the four-tier implementation of Response to Instruction. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) recognizes that there are multi-level influences on successful implementation of state Response to Instruction (RtI) due to contextual variables including local school district organizational components as well as local social, economic, and political influences (NCDPI, 2011).

Rural District Issues

Education in North Carolina rural districts confronts many of the obstacles to implementation of effective instructional processes that are at the core of state RtI. Since more than half of the students enrolled in North Carolina public schools attend rural schools, and North Carolina has the second largest rural student population in the nation,

the implications of the findings of state RtI implementation in rural districts may be applicable to other rural settings (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2011). Rural education in North Carolina is complex due to the changing economic, social, and political elements that impact how it functions. Some are increasing in population and diversity while others are decreasing in size and facing economic challenges.

While some rural communities are thriving as they have been for over a hundred years, many are experiencing a variety of stressful developments. Whole counties are developing so fast that rural culture, traditions, and relationships are breaking apart. Communities that used to be anchored by the rhythms and traditions of small family farm life have morphed into enormous hog and chicken factories, employing fewer workers. Many rural areas are experiencing an influx of children whose first language is not English, and schools strain to find teachers for them. At the same time, 15 rural counties are losing population and are economically on the brink. In most countywide districts, small rural communities have long lost their community schools to consolidation. (McCullough & Johnson, 2007, p. 5)

Changes continue to evolve in rural North Carolina areas that compound the local educational issues. Limited resources and difficulty with attraction of and retention of quality teachers negatively impact the chances for the students in rural areas to improve academically. Additionally, rural schools receive a lower portion of their school funding from the state than do suburban or town schools, which makes funding initiatives more challenging, and due to the economic downfall in North Carolina rural counties, yields a more limited local tax base (Rural School and Community Trust, 2011). The basis for supporting an educational reform such as state RtI in rural districts remains challenging.

Purpose of the Study

Leadership is crucial to the development of Response to Instruction implementation. Effective leadership in rural schools often looks different than effective leadership in other places (Theobald, 2005). Rural leaders must balance their varied roles in the school and the community because they are more highly visible and more easily accessible. However, rural districts are rarely the site of active research (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2000). Most research is focused on urban areas where there is a more consolidated population base and concentrated areas of economic disadvantage. Rural schools, not only in North Carolina but across the nation, are often ignored and kept out of the information loop when confronting state and federal expectations and are usually not included when public policy is crafted, since their student populations are relatively small when compared to the urban districts (McCullough & Johnson, 2007).

Specifically, research conducted regarding federal RtI implementation has focused either on school-level implementation or on district-level implementation in urban districts. While both of these research foci are important, in the state of North Carolina where 85% of the state is considered rural, a focus on effective state RtI implementation in school districts identified as rural is both relevant and timely. Reform orchestration can be challenging, particularly when decreased educational funding is impacting how schools are run. The exploration of effective implementation frameworks during a period with limited funding is particularly important so that replication of effective strategies could occur.

Rural North Carolina continues to demonstrate considerable change. The economic impact of job loss and an increase in student demographic diversity provide significant factors to consider in systemic process implementation. The societal issues impact school district effectiveness in implementation because of the limited economic resources available to the rural districts through local tax bases, decreased state-level supports, and difficulty with quality staff recruitment and retention. In addition, an increase in student population diversity has led to the need for various kinds of intervention developments to match the learning issues of resident students.

With the use of an increased focus on early intervention, students with learning deficits can be identified via periodic screenings, and teachers can implement interventions to remediate the skill deficits before the student falls significantly behind. IDEIA allows for schools to use up to 15% of their allotted funding towards early intervention processes for ALL students, so these funds might provide a revenue source for intervention programming (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Subsequent personalized instruction can be designed to meet student-specific weaknesses through differentiated instruction. Teachers are empowered to address individual, small group, and large group needs, where the instruction is driven and refined through periodic assessments, known as progress monitoring. Federal RtI emphasizes the use of quality teaching through the use of research-based methods. Professional development for school staff that is on-going can facilitate effective instruction and understanding of the

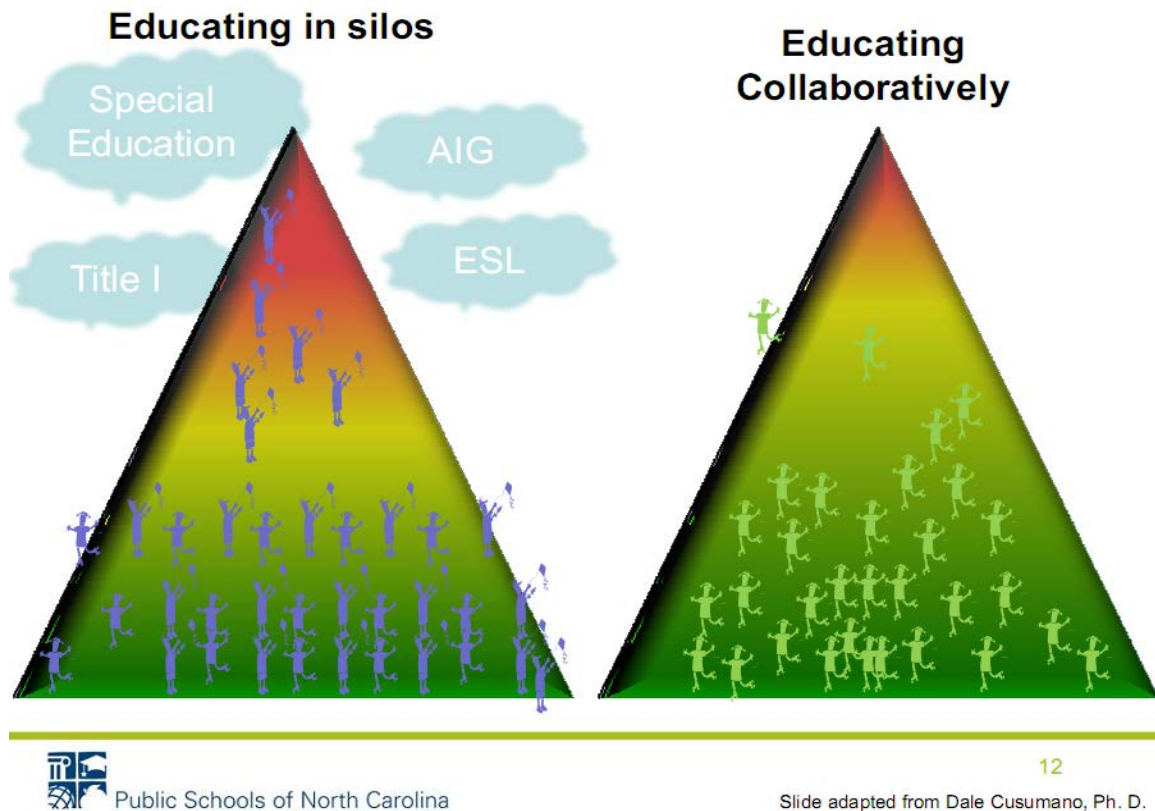
core curriculum, foster additional strategies and academic interventions, and support assessment tool development, enhancing student learning.

The federal RtI framework also celebrates the individuality of students through their unique characteristics, which can create a positive atmosphere “where learners feel supported and confident in who they are. They are also more likely to be motivated when instruction accounts for their learning strengths and interest areas” (Whitten, Esteves, & Woodrow, 2009, p. 3).

Finally, the federal RtI framework reinforces the need for school-wide collaboration. Rather than operating within segregated departments, school administrators, classroom instructors, special educators, and educational specialists are expected to work together. School staff members participate on RtI teams, exploring student difficulties and planning appropriate student-specific interventions. Due to the range of knowledge among team members, shared knowledge can drive the development of and ownership for remedies for students. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s graphic for this kind of collaboration, adapted from Cusumano’s work (NCDPI, 2011) shown in Figure 3, demonstrates how education can become a collaborative process rather than a divided process.

Conceptually, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction demonstrates how state RtI can provide an integral scaffold within which essential elements of educational reform are framed. State RtI creates a learning environment where the Common Core Curriculum of early literacy, curriculum reform, and professional

development can potentially provide the prevention and intervention components for ALL students, combined with the framework for learning disability determination in special education.



Source: NCDPI RtI Training Powerpoint retrieved from: <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/curriculum/responsiveness/rtimaterials/overview.pdf>

Figure 3. The Collaboration of Response to Intervention.

The state RtI is a model of school reform focused on instructional resources that can meet the academic needs of students. “It is about the way that schools use screening, formative, progress monitoring, diagnostic, and summative assessments to ensure that

instruction is differentiated and that interventions are implemented for all students not demonstrating proficient levels of achievement” (Whitelock, 2010, p. 27). School teams need to consider and plan for school structures, teaching resources, implementation of core and intervention curriculums, the use of multiple assessment models, and the organization of data-driven dialogues.

The federal laws that provided the foundation for the Response to Instruction often fail to consider the context of implementation. The implementation of the federal RtI system in school districts is a complex and challenging process. Developing and sustaining a comprehensive, preventive, supportive, and corrective system requires an extensive investment of energy, time, and resources at the district level. In rural school districts where staffing and resources are limited, the exploration of effective implementation processes may assist other districts in their implementation.

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives and practices of the central office leadership that led to successful RtI implementation. As a researcher, I sought to explore the process used by leadership to facilitate effective implementation of state RtI. Additionally, I sought to understand the subsequent perspectives of school staff regarding the central office leadership process. The intended outcome was to glean responses to these research questions:

1. How has rural school district leadership led the implementation of RtI?
2. What are the pragmatics specific to RtI implementation in rural school districts?

3. How do school-based personnel interpret the guidance from district-level regarding RtI implementation?
4. What specific strategies/interventions are developed to meet the unique needs of the rural student?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Background Leading to Response to Intervention

Since the 1960s, federal policies have attempted to provide educational access and equity for students. Historical policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), the Rehabilitation Act (1973), and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) were focused to improve academic achievement through additional services and programming. ESEA reinforced accountability and the setting of high standards through funding programs for schools via the state departments of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 focused on serving students with disabilities in a manner that was non-discriminatory. Commonly known as Section 504 in schools, this act

is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities, public or private, that receive federal financial assistance. This law conforms to the definition of disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA). Section 504 does not provide funding for special education or related services, but it does permit the federal government to take funding away from programs that do not comply with the law. (NCLD, 2011, “What is Section 504,” para. 1)

Although these guidelines apply to the workplace as well, in public schools Section 504 “clearly states that a free and appropriate education must be made available to all

qualified students with disabilities. The educational needs of students with disabilities must be met as adequately as the needs of students without disabilities” (NCLD, 2011, “What Services are Available,” para. 1).

Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHCA) was signed into law in 1975. The purpose of this legislation was to provide *equal access* to public schools for all students with disabilities. The EHCA was passed as a means of providing funding to states to support that equal access to schools for students with disabilities. These civil rights legislative acts were prompted by Congress’s perspective that the rights of the groups of citizens had been previously violated (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009).

The EHCA legislation in 1975 provided for four areas of focus. The initial area of focus was to identify children with disabilities. The next area of focus was to develop procedural safeguards in the process of identification. These safeguards include parental consent forms, referral forms, placement permissions, recognition of rights, and the Individual Education Program (IEP) development. The third area of focus was to support provisions for students with disabilities including the mandate for the right to be educated, the articulation of a set of rules to which school districts must adhere when educating these students and adding a requirement for schools to work on the transition of students with disabilities from high school to post-secondary life. The fourth involved assessing whether the supports in place were, in fact, providing effective outcomes for students with disabilities. Priorities over the next few decades for school personnel in

particular became the identification and placement of those students with disabilities into special education programs (U.S. DOE, 2010a). However, limited accountability measures were in place to evaluate the academic results for identified students or even those at risk for being identified. Achievement gaps particularly among minority and poverty-impacted students have been an issue (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005a, 2005b).

Additionally, children with disabilities were *perceived* as belonging to the special education program and therefore were not a focal point of instruction within regular education (Marston et al., 2003). They received some additional academic assistance, first through pull-out or resource services with special education instructors and more recently through inclusive models of instruction where regular education and special education teachers partner within the regular classroom setting. This process allows for teacher teaming where all students access instruction from a highly qualified content teacher and a partner instructor who possesses specialty knowledge about varied learning styles/methods to assist the student in accessing the general curriculum. However, even as these students were identified, they continued to struggle with the same curriculum and instructional strategies given to other students. Subsequently, the regular education teachers began to question their ability to teach students with disabilities due to their academic struggles, which reinforced the perceived need to refer them to special education services.

Simultaneously, the rate of students identified into programming for students with disabilities has increased by over 28% since 1976 (NCES, 2007) with minority and second-language learning students being identified at high rates (Hosp & Madyum, 2007; NCES, 2007). As more and more students were deemed to qualify for special education services, greater attention via the national reform movement was directed toward student outcomes. Ultimately, this attention became focused on instruction happening within the regular education setting (Klotz & Nealis, 2005).

Accountability Develops

The 1990s led the standards-based educational reform movement that established national and state standards of proficiency levels for students to achieve at each grade level. Since then, educators have been expected to engage students in learning through communication of the learning goals, provide feedback in relation to student progress, and assess student learning progress in comparison to a specified benchmark. The federal RtI model requires educational systems to push beyond the expectations of ensuring that the core curriculum is taught, giving students adequate time and opportunity to learn it and has a strong correlation with academic achievement (Marzano, 2000), while additionally requiring that the core curriculum and intervention curriculums and processes are research-based.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) showed that “approximately 38% of fourth-grade students and up to 70% of poor students, often minority students who live in urban or isolated settings, demonstrate inadequate reading skills” (as cited in

Whitelock, 2010, “Core Curriculum,” para. 1). Studies have demonstrated that the use of classroom instruction and targeted interventions can result in all but 2 to 5% of children in first grade acquiring basic reading skills, while older students with reading difficulties who receive remediation that is intensive, strategic, and long-term can become proficient (Mathes et al., 2005; Torgensen et al., 2001). “Research-based, scientifically validated intervention/instruction provide our best shot at implementing strategies that will be effective for a large majority of students” (Batsche et al., 2005, p. 380).

School leaders must therefore evaluate their instructional program, strategies, and intervention resources, exploring the delivery of the core curriculum, the availability of research-based interventions to meet the needs of students requiring higher-level and more intensive intervention strategies, and mechanisms to support the professional development of staff to support their efforts in providing instruction with fidelity including differentiation strategies. School leaders must facilitate a learning environment that will allow all students to learn by providing the tools to support struggling learners, while challenging the advanced learner. Decisions about a student’s learning are measured using data-driven outcomes.

The school reform effort means that school professionals collaboratively look at data to identify students in need of interventions, inform instruction, differentiate in the classroom, and identify students for special education. Schools who implement core and intervention curriculums with fidelity while also differentiating based on student performance data ensure that all students learn. (Whitelock, 2010, p. 27)

General education (Black & William, 1998) and special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986) have clearly recognized throughout the years that using data to measure student progress on an on-going and consistent basis provides a direction for instruction and ultimately will provide positive academic outcomes. The true power of the framework of federal Responsive to Intervention (RtI) is setting expectations including high standards and focused instructional strategies using demonstrated curriculum and using data to assess its impact. All levels of educational systems need to be able to make logical decisions regarding resource allocation. Effective and research-based strategies need to be available for immediate implementation once a deficit is identified. Educational professionals who can support regular education and special education teachers in problem-solving, decision-making, and strategy and program intervention implementation need to be readily available. However, a collaborative method of providing educational supports to struggling students requires an efficient use of resources.

Upon taking the office in January 2001, President George Bush expressed grave concern that despite increased Federal funding to support public schools, many of the most at-risk students were not making academic progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This led to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. The No Child Left Behind legislation provided additional measurable expectations for public schools. It also provided school choice options for parents, if their school was not meeting academic expectations, as well as provided a focus on reading instruction. The

use of Title I funds was given higher accountability expectations by requiring states to implement annual academic assessments, with results being broken down by sub-groups, so that no group of children would be neglected educationally (U.S. DOE, 2004).

President Barack Obama indicated in the 2010 Blueprint for Reform that “every child in America deserves a world-class education. . . . A world-class education is also a moral imperative—the key to securing a more equal, fair, and just society” (p. 1). He also cites that, while educators play crucial roles in facilitating this effort,

reforming our schools to deliver a world-class education is a shared responsibility—the task cannot be shouldered by our nation’s teachers and principals alone. We must foster school environments where teachers have the time to collaborate, the opportunities to lead, and the respect that all professionals deserve. We must recognize the importance of communities and families in supporting their children’s education, because a parent is a child’s first teacher. We must support families, communities, and schools working in partnership to deliver services and supports that address the full range of student needs. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a, p. 1)

In addition, cross-cutting priorities are noted in the Blueprint which identify targeted priority areas of reform in education including technology, efficiency, evidence (of effectiveness), meeting the needs of students who are disabled or second language learners, and supporting rural and other high need areas of the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a).

In place of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals originally written as part of No Child Left Behind, states had the ability to apply for flexibility waivers from the key provisions of the legislation. A large majority of the states have some sort of a waiver

from the initial process established by NCLB, while others have waiver applications under review. North Carolina received a flexibility waiver in 2012 in exchange for a state-developed plan whose goals included focusing on the support of effective educational leaders and teachers and to aid the most academically challenged students while also supporting students in acquiring college and career readiness skills (NCDPI, 2012a).

Rather than reporting on Adequate Yearly Progress, NCDPI will report on Annual Measurable Objectives. These include more specific achievement targets for each student group, guarantees that at least 95% of students participate in testing, high school graduation rate targets for each student group, and attendance rate targets for students in grades K-8. (NCDPI, 2012a, para. 7)

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) provided criteria by which schools should improve educational strategies. There was an expectation for increased instructional quality at all grade levels. The reauthorizations have remolded the methods to monitor and to address academic disparities by moving away from narrow and often restrictive ways to instruct at-risk learners. Both legislative acts expect high quality instruction paired with high standards and the use of intervention strategies with proven effectiveness from research (IDEIA, 2004; NCLB, 2002).

However, before federal RtI was written as a part of IDEIA, professional literature, particularly in school psychology, questioned educational assessment and disability identification methods (Christ et al., 1995; McMaster et al., 2005; Reschly &

Ysseldyke, 1995). The paradigm from which federal RtI evolved used assessment data to direct and drive instructional interventions rather than to identify disabilities using a deficit model. Because there was limited information available on actual implementation of a federal RtI process to make it policy, there remained considerable debate on whether making it policy was reasonable.

This process was personally relevant for me for two reasons. I was trained as a school psychologist under this paradigm in the 1980s, when the use of assessment data to support instructional interventions was popular, but we were rarely able to implement it in a school setting. The practice was sidelined as a part of my professional repertoire. Over 30 years later, it is in fact a miracle to be investigating the implementation of a training tool from a lifetime ago.

In addition, I participated in multiple efforts of state RtI implementation within one rural school district in North Carolina over a period of seven years. The seemingly start-progress-change-start again-progress-change process that I experienced in the district mirrors the inconsistent implementation process in the state. My local district's changes, however, were reflective of local administrative changes over time and their respective perception of how RtI should be designed. This led to my interest in identifying characteristics that led to stellar reform implementation, particularly during a time when several federal legislative acts were impacting the way schools identified and subsequently served struggling students.

For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments of 2008 provided for a broadening of the definition of individuals with disabilities. As a non-discriminatory provision for which institutions receiving federal financial assistance are held accountable, the institutions under this measure are obligated to provide a framework under which individuals with disabilities are granted, minimally, accommodations to allow them comparable access to those individuals without disabilities. Specifically, the amendment defines the disability or condition to be one that:

substantially limits one major life activity need not limit other major life activities in order to be considered a disability . . . including an impairment that is episodic or in remission is a disability if it would substantially limit a major life activity when active..and activity shall be made without regard to the ameliorative effects of mitigating measures such as medication, medical supplies, equipment, or appliances, low-vision devices (which do not include ordinary eyeglasses or contact lenses), prosthetics including limbs and devices, hearing aids and cochlear implants or other implantable hearing devices, mobility devices, or oxygen therapy equipment and supplies. (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 as amended, 2008)

The definition for *substantially limits* and subsequent eligibility for the development of accommodations is vague and decided in schools by a team knowledgeable about the student. An assessment must be provided prior to the accommodation development to make sure that the student does not meet the threshold of disability eligibility needed under IDEIA. These students may be provided appropriate accommodations to *level the playing field* in comparison to average peers if they are determined to be substantially limited by the condition they possess.

Response to Intervention Emerges

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) allowed school systems additional options for evaluating public school students suspected of possessing specific learning disabilities (SLD). However, the overarching goal of the focus on general instruction was/is to provide educational outcomes where all students demonstrated achievement growth, whether they possess a disability or not. A developing framework that provides scaffolding of increasingly intensive research-based methods of instruction is Response to Intervention or Responsiveness to Instruction, the terminology adopted by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Both processes can be designated as RtI with a primary focus on reading instruction, since the majority of students identified with specific learning disabilities are those with significant reading difficulties (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). In this project, a differentiation between the federal Response to Intervention will be federal RtI and the state Responsiveness to Instruction will be designated as state RtI.

Over a decade of research has established federal RtI as an effective model for addressing learning difficulties in schools. Many of the studies supporting the efficacy of the federal RtI model have been conducted by United States government agencies seeking to establish best practices for identifying and addressing learning disabilities, while the predominance of the studies have supported RtI's effectiveness in the promotion of reading instruction at the elementary level (Batsche, Curtis, Dorman,

Castillo, & Porter, 2007; Bender & Shores, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Hughes & Dexter, 2009). Some state educational systems have taken proactive positions on the use of RtI to determine exceptional education eligibility allowable within the IDEIA parameters. Iowa's system, for example, "was designed to expand assessment practices to utilize the breadth of skill of professionals to understand learning needs and support teachers" (Ikeda, 2012, p. 275).

Ikeda (2012) identifies some conclusions obtained from reviewing research, researching himself and using the problem-solving model for more than a decade. First, he perceives that, while school professionals want to do what is best for students, teachers may not possess the skills they need to provide adequate differentiation beyond accommodations. Second, the implementation of proven practices by teachers in schools brings about student improvement, but it is difficult to imbed effective strategies within school environments unless structural reorganization occurs. The system, according to Ikeda's findings, still reinforces teacher referrals for special education, which will continue to result in a higher percentage of minority, poor, and second-language learning students. Ikeda doubts that special education identification rates will be reduced by federal RtI implementation, and even those students who have been deemed eligible for exceptional education as a result of intervention-based resistance, fail to demonstrate improved educational outcomes (Ikeda, 2012).

The foundation of federal RtI consists of basic beliefs and procedures that, when working in harmony, will support increased academic achievement through improved

instructional strategies (IDEA Partnership @ NASDSE, 2005). The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) believes that, “large-scale implementation of any reform effort requires an understanding of the core principles that guide the practice as well as the core components that define the practice” (Batsche et al., 2005, p. 19).

The core principles of RtI are as follows:

1. All children can learn (by supplying the curricular, instructional, and environmental conditions to support this)
2. Early intervention is essential (for both academic and behavioral to intervene early on before learning deficits expand)
3. Implementation of a multi-tier model of service delivery (matching resources to student needs in a timely fashion)
4. Problem-solving guides practice (applied to all students in a system, from whole class to small groups to individual students; Barnes & Harlacher, 2008).

While the goal of these legislative acts, NCLB and IDEIA, is commendable, they often overlook the complexity of the individual students who enter the school buildings, the family and community from which they come, their learning styles, interests, and motivation. In addition, the legislation does not take into account the specific organizational structure in which they learn. Whether in affluent suburban neighborhoods, urban inner-city communities, or rural, sparsely populated school

districts, all systems are being held to educational standards that apply to all children. Some schools are experiencing great success with implementation of the systemic reforms, while others continue to struggle. One might wonder what factors bring about the successes that some schools demonstrate when their counterparts are meeting with failures.

Thus, the proposed focus of exploration of the implementation of the Responsiveness to Instruction (RtI) in rural America becomes even more relevant. There exists an overall concern about the very future of rural education and rural life, particularly when compared with the increasingly globalized and urbanized societies. “Poverty and rurality intersect in three types of rural communities: those based on agriculture, those founded on resource extraction, and those *suburbanized* from outside” (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 4). Place matters crucially to education’s aims and content, as well as its context. The concepts of belonging, displacement, resilience and resistance, and even the possibility of renewal can provide mechanisms to buy into or resist the cultural changes evolving within the world of education. The question of what it means to be a rural teacher in a shifting world can be demonstrated through the adoption of Response to Intervention/Instruction principles. “The professional (including moral) obligations of teachers also come into question as communities struggle with new economic realities and schools try to cope with resulting instability and transience alongside external demands for standardization of curriculum and assessment” (Darling, 2011, p. 14).

The Rural School District Context

The context of the setting may influence responses regarding priority factors for successful RtI implementation. In school systems with relatively limited resources, there may be less opportunity for the district to make available a broad range of intervention options to meet student needs.

Such is the status of many rural school districts where financial deficits, a lack of curricular resources, and the recruitment of high quality teachers is lagging. “For rural communities, the school is often the most important institution in town, providing the community with its only social supports as well as its primary identity” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 34). While technology and distance learning have provided a venue for connectivity for rural students, the achievement gap reflected through the gap between rich and the poor continues to expand. “Moreover, rural students’ inability to keep up, despite sophisticated teaching methods and rigorous standards, is apt to be linked to their poor mental and psychological well-being rather than their cognitive abilities” (Johnson, 2006b, p. 13). While the use of a Response to Intervention (Instruction) process within *any* school system should ultimately aid in overall student achievement, in *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community in a Globalizing World* Schafft and Jackson note that “even as schools claim to be the heart of the community, they present a radical challenge to its survival by preparing children to sever any attachment to place. The curriculum of rural schools is ‘fundamentally a story from somewhere else’” (2010, p. 3). The professional (including

moral) obligations of teachers also come into question as communities struggle with new economic realities and schools try to cope with resulting instability and transience alongside external demands for standardization of curriculum and assessment (Darling, 2011). Case studies from rural districts revealed powerful tensions confronted by teachers and students when “global forces increasingly pit cities against rural communities . . . resulting in an increase in rural-urban inequality,” indicating the need for training of rural educators emphasizing family and community connections (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 4). The authors identify that location of communities and societies matters significantly to accountability, educational goals, and content, particularly within the United States and as a result of the policies related to the No Child Left Behind legislation. Response to Intervention, as an educational process, needs to be investigated within the context of the school environment as well as the district location so that an exploration of effective implementation strategies can be identified.

Rural schools possess varied contextual characteristics that demand leadership qualities and organizational components that differ from their non-rural counterparts (Theobald, 2005). However, little research has been focused on these unique rural leadership practices (Arnold et al., 2000). Likewise, rural school systems confront differing obstacles to effective implementation of policies, be they state or federal. The context of those districts creates scenarios where challenges to improvement can be daunting. The rural educational leader “faces unique rural contextual challenges,

including high poverty levels, wide ranging job responsibilities, and a significant public role” (Forner et al., 2012, p.11).

Rural school district leaders are confronted with poverty and economic loss that is not typically reflected in urban or suburban schools. There are 9.6 million students in public schools residing in rural areas, and in many areas, that number is growing (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data showed that while nearly 25% of rural children live in poverty, less than 22% of those in urban areas are classified to live in poverty. The rate of rural students living in poverty doubled if the head of household is a woman (USDA, 2011). Most educational research has focused on the issues of teaching urban students who come from poverty, while, as the data reflect, there is a higher rate of rural children who reside in poverty.

Rural school leadership must also function in a setting with resource scarcity (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012). This limitation presents a significant challenge for district officials. Staffing limitations inhibit division of responsibilities among leadership, impacting the effectiveness of policy implementation and staff development opportunities as well as the recruitment and retention of quality teachers (Lamkin, 2006).

Rural school leaders confront the issue of serving as very public individuals with little privacy as a third major challenge (Lamkin, 2006). Rural communities are typically made up of close family networks that span generations (Lamkin, 2006). In rural

America, relationships are complex and inter-related with little margins between personal and work, creating a difficult environment for facilitating change.

Similarly, an understanding of the demographic context of RtI implementation is crucial. Schafft and Jackson (2010) provide an overview of the deeply intertwined issues regarding culture, identity, and education present in rural America. The series of articles in this book discuss the “interrelationship between school and community, and how that interrelationship is shaped by the global-local context in which it is embedded” (p. 3). Rural America has not only experienced major alterations in its population historically, it is also currently experiencing additional influxes (Johnson, 2006a).

A Report of the Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program demonstrates the complexity of rural education. It identified means of evaluating rural education nationwide, which relates to a measure of how the condition of the rural education system impacts the state’s public education system in its entirety. More specifically, North Carolina is one of four states with the largest rural enrollment; over 50% of the state’s schools are considered to be rural. “North Carolina alone has more rural students than the Northern and Southern Great Plains states of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma-combined” (Strange et al., 2012, p. 4).

Rural education, therefore, is extremely relevant to North Carolina’s overall education system, earning a ranking of fifth in the nation in what, reinforcing the importance for rural educational issues to be heard by those crafting educational policies.

Rural school population has been shown to be increasing in North Carolina over the past decade. In addition, North Carolina is identified as one of nine states where more than one in three rural students is identified as a minority student. North Carolina also has a high number of second-language learning students living in rural areas, supporting its high ranking on a student diversity gauge, with an increase of rural Hispanic enrollment of 293% between 1999/2000 and 2008/2009 school years. This data demonstrates how rural education in North Carolina is growing in its challenges in meeting the needs of diverse and economically deprived student needs (Strange et al., 2012). “Identifying states with the largest (relative) rural minority student populations calls attention to the states with the greatest need for policy action to support the closing of achievement gaps based on race/ethnicity” (Strange et al., 2012, p. 6).

Growth in rural school enrollment is outpacing non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and rural schools are becoming more complex with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and special needs students...Its geographical dispersion, its small and decentralized institutions, its isolation, and the cultural conservatism of many of its communities make rural education a conundrum to reformers and policy makers whose experiences and concerns are so focused on urban education. (Strange et al., 2012, p. 21)

More research is needed on RtI practices in rural schools, particularly focusing on their implementation strategies and the ability of rural schools to achieve sustainable systems change (Strohmyer, 2010).

While the context of learning for all students falls within the general education domain, how does the implementation of educational reform, such as Response to

Intervention (RtI) occur in rural America? Do the issues of rural America truly impact education's aims and content?

Defining Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention or Response to Instruction or Responsiveness to Intervention or Responsiveness to Instruction are all typically referred to as RtI. This effort is being used in school systems across the nation to support the academic growth of all students. The framework of RtI does provide a general model for instruction and subsequent focused intervention for all students. "In principle, RtI is proposed as a valuable construct for schools because of its potential utility in the provision of appropriate learning experiences for all students and in the early identification of students as being at risk for academic failure" (The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities, 2005, p. 12). Literature on successful school reform efforts identifies leadership, professional development, staff acceptance or buy-in, time for collaboration, and efficient and effective use of personnel as crucial to the implementation of change initiatives (Harlacher & Siler, 2011). There are key elements in any school reform effort for which the school is responsible and are related to successful RtI implementation. Foremost, the expected and reinforced use of high quality instruction and behavior interventions and screening of both to aid in determining specific students who are struggling and in need of more intensive interventions (Klotz & Canter, 2007).

Most researchers identify a group of essential components to Response to Intervention. Johnson et al. (2006) in a booklet, *Response to Intervention: How to Do It*,

summarize the main points. Similarly, Mellard (2011) identifies those essential components of RtI to include: (a) the monitoring of student progress in the curriculum with assessments, (b) choice of and implementation of a scientifically-proven intervention matched to identified student deficit areas, (c) the use of guidelines and parameters to determine students not demonstrating progress to a focused intervention, (d) monitoring of student outcomes in the intervention consistently at least once per week, (e) ensuring that the intervention is delivered with fidelity, (f) identifying the intervention intensity required for the student to progress (sessions per day/length of session), and (g) provision of parent notice of a student referral and request for a comprehensive evaluation if there is a suspicion of the existence of a disability.

Similarly, and more generally, Mellard (2003) identifies a strong RtI program as one that combines important features of on-going monitoring, assessment, and instruction to address limitation in regular education and the aptitude-achievement discrepancy models of learning disability identification.

Core features of a strong RtI program includes: (a) high-quality classroom instruction, (b) research-based instruction, (c) active teacher involvement in student assessment focused on classroom performance, (d) universal screening, (e) continuous progress monitoring, (f) research-based interventions validated through studies, (g) progress monitoring during interventions, and (h) the use of fidelity measures to ensure the intervention is implemented as intended and with consistency (National Research Center on Learning Disabilities, 2007, p. 2)

However, there remain multiple issues and dilemmas confronting school systems and district administrators in their implementation of RtI. The student assessments

(screening and progress monitoring) and the identification, implementation, and monitoring of specific interventions at various tiers with varying levels of intensity needs to be a complex, comprehensive, yet individualized and well-orchestrated process.

Successful implementation of RtI is multi-faceted and involves knowledge of evidence-based interventions, multi-tiered intervention models, screening, assessment and progress monitoring, administering interventions with a high degree of integrity, support and coordinated efforts at staff and all levels of leadership in the school, and sustaining systems of prevention grounded in the RtI framework. (Kratowill, Valopiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007)

The RtI process is designed to provide all students with academic and behavioral interventions. According to the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET), “the purpose of RtI is to provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school, identify students with learning or behavioral problems, and ensure that they receive appropriate instruction and related supports” (NASSET, n.d., para. 1). RtI requires the use of intervention coordinated with ongoing assessment whose goal is to increase student achievement and reduce inappropriate behaviors using an integrated progressively intensive system of prevention. “Schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending upon a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities” (Keany, 2012, p. 4).

In an RtI system, the instructional approach needs to be administered with flexibility. If a student’s needs increase, the intervention needs to be modified or altered

to assist the student with gaining success in the regular classroom (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Universal screening and progress monitoring are vital and inherent elements of RtI. The data obtained from these assessments, grade level teams, or the school problem-solving team aid in developing a skills-based intervention for that student. The data can also aid in determining the effectiveness of the intervention (Busch & Reschly, 2007). Additionally, the RtI process and the data it produces can be used to differentiate ineffective teaching from a student learning issue. This process can aid in moving away from a student-owned deficit model (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004).

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a progressive method of integrating quality academic instruction with intervention. The interventions should be systematically matched to identified student skill deficits. The process requires the frequent monitoring of student progress in order to drive decision-making regarding instructional strategies or goals and is theoretically designed to assist with important and relevant instructional decisions to drive instruction (NASDE, 2005). RtI enables teachers to evaluate which students may need specialized instruction based upon the outcome data obtained in the classroom. Additionally, targeted intervention can be developed within the classroom in a small group setting (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). Teachers have questioned reliance on the use of research-based outcome data when they were taught to use their knowledge and intuition.

Drawing upon personal experience is necessary and desirable in a veteran teacher, but it is not making critical judgments about the effectiveness of an instructional strategy or curriculum. The insufficiency of personal experience becomes clear if

we consider that the educational judgment—even of veteran teachers—often are in conflict. That is why we have to adjudicate conflicting knowledge claims using the scientific method. (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003, p. 29)

When teachers use research-based methodologies that rely on progress monitoring data, they are forced to focus on student skill areas. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) described a study where teachers were questioned about their concerns for a student. There was a group using research-based strategies and a control group who was not. Those using the progress monitoring process were able to identify skill area needs when describing the student, while those in the control group described external variables that did not give specifics about learning. The control group mentioned barriers such as limited motivation, family dynamics, and English proficiency, which did little to improve the direction of the instruction.

In addition, the fidelity of the implementation of interventions will impact effectiveness (NASDSE and CASE, 2006). Therefore, training of staff on intervention implementation with fidelity is a key component to the success of RtI and can render improved academic outcomes.

The reliability and validity with which RtI is implemented will be determined, to a great extent, by the quality of both the pre-service and in-service professional development models used to translate research into practice. In-service professional development needs to occur both within and across administrative structures at the state, district and building levels. Successful professional development must include all three components of skill development: beliefs and attitudes; knowledge; and skill. (NASDSE, 2006, p. 6)

RtI can provide a method for assessing student skills levels to make instructional decisions using data (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). Teachers need adequate training and practice (Gersten & Dimino, 2006) as well as on-going support to effectively implement interventions. Teachers without training and understanding of intervention implementation may not have adequate buy-in to the process (Gersten, Baker, Haager, & Graves, 2005). Similarly, learning how to adjust instruction based on progress monitoring requires skill and individual investment. Therefore, a student could be nonresponsive to intervention because of a teacher's limited understanding regarding the process of consistent and appropriate intervention (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). However, with the roll-out of the revised core curriculum in North Carolina currently underway, interventions that are integrally connected to this core curriculum seem to make sense to teachers. In addition, Gersten and Dimino (2006) noted that with monitoring and support teachers more effectively implemented interventions and monitored their student's learning based on research observations.

A focus on the development of effective professional development programs has been sparked by the need to meet achievement goals set by the No Child Left Behind legislation. The legislation also established five criteria for evaluating that professional development meets the standard for being high quality. The first of these is that the professional development should be intensive, content-focused, and conducted over a period of time to ensure a positive and lasting effect on teacher performance and instruction. The second criterion is the alignment of state academic content standards and

assessments. Additional criteria involve enhancing a teacher's content knowledge and that of understanding research-based instructional practices. The final criterion is that professional development should be evaluated for teacher effectiveness and subsequent student progress (Barker, 2011).

According to a report by the National Staff Development Council (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009), professional development practices should encourage a continuous cycle of improvement that evaluates student outcomes, defines learning goals based on data analysis and achieves goals by implementing research-based instructional strategies and on-going assessments to improve instructional effectiveness and student success. Batsche et al. (2007) propose that the success of RtI implementation is contingent upon the quality of the staff development. Successful staff development needs to address three components: (a) current beliefs and attitudes of teachers, (b) the development of a knowledge-base on RtI, and (c) providing opportunities for all school staff to practice the skills required for implementation (Barker, 2011). Skills necessary for RtI implementation include using tools to assess instructional quality, using data to evaluate instructional quality and level of student risk, and making accurate decisions for more intensive services based upon data. Burns and Ysseldyke (2005) indicate that professional learning and ongoing collaboration are critical in sustaining effective RtI practices. Successful RtI implementation is multifaceted and not only includes a knowledge of research-based interventions, screening, assessment, and progress monitoring but also a high degree of

program integrity and support from teachers, psychologists, and support staff (Kratochwill, Clements, & Kalymon, 2007).

The Framework

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) encourages schools to adopt RtI but fails to support any specific paradigm. The department does endorse core characteristics that it believes support all RtI models including: (a) high-quality research-based instruction, (b) monitoring of student performance, (c) screening related to academic and behavioral issues, and (d) multiple tiers of instruction that can increase in intensity and duration based on student response (Griffin, 2009).

Most Response to Intervention systems utilize a three-tiered approach, although there are some individuals who prefer a four-tier approach. The common feature remains that there is advancement in the intensity of the intervention based upon student responsiveness (NASDE, 2005).

Although variances occur in the exact manner of implementation across the nation, Tier 1 is typically defined to be students within the regular education setting, receiving high quality, evidence (research-based) based instruction using effective and research-based instructional strategies. Tier 1 is designed to serve 80% of the student population. Tier 2 interventions are designed for students who are failing to meet with academic success within the Tier 1 setting and are administered consistent small group interventions matched to the skill deficits the student is demonstrating. Targeted group interventions are designed to serve 15% of the student population in Tier 2. Tier 3

interventions are defined to be the use of regular specific skill-based research-based programming in addition to the regular education supports already in place. This tier could be administered in a small group or individually and denotes an environmental adaptation to instruct a student using a varied approach to meet the student needs. Structurally, this tier is designed to serve 5% of the student population using intense, durable interventions.

Most governing agencies, including the Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina (NCDPI), acknowledge that there are multiple ways to implement RtI. However, RtI is typically designed as a three-tier model that uses a solid core instruction with increasingly intensified interventions based on student response. In Tier I, the focus is on the general education classroom where students receive a scientifically-based curriculum. The Core Curriculum is a state-generated core curriculum that focuses on standards accepted in many states across the nation, has been rolled out/taught to existing staff, and the teachers are subsequently expected to incorporate these new curricular standards within the RtI framework. The core curriculum expects a deeper and higher-level understanding of key concepts as compared to the previous curriculum. Teachers work with their grade-level and Professional Learning Community Teams to identify and implement strategies that might benefit the student not making progress in the updated curricular standards.

In Tier II, students who are not responding to the targeted instruction/strategies provided in Tier I, may require the development of a Personal Education Plan (PEP) to

identify areas of strength and areas in need of more targeted direct instruction to supplement the regular core classroom instruction. Parent and student input are gathered as a problem-solving, plan-development strategy and incorporated into the PEP. Students who fail to demonstrate substantial progress may be considered for more intensive interventions in Tier III and are also referred to the Student Support Team (SST) for additional problem-solving support. In Tier III, students receive more intensive interventions that may include more individualized instruction, an increase in the number of intervention times per week, or a longer time period of intervention. Interventions in Tier II and Tier III depend upon the school site resources and site-based decision/problem-solving process. Outcome data and information produce the feedback on performance/response to the additional/supplemental or differentiated instructional strategies (NCDPI, 2011).

The three-tiered model, as developed by one public school system in North Carolina, is shown in Figure 4. The Instructional Support Model tiers link to research-based interventions in reading that teachers, teacher teams, and SST teams may use to aid them in problem-solving and providing solutions for struggling learners. Additional strategies and interventional components in the curricular areas of math, writing, and behavior are currently being gathered and will be added to this model to assist school-based teams in problem-solving intervention development.

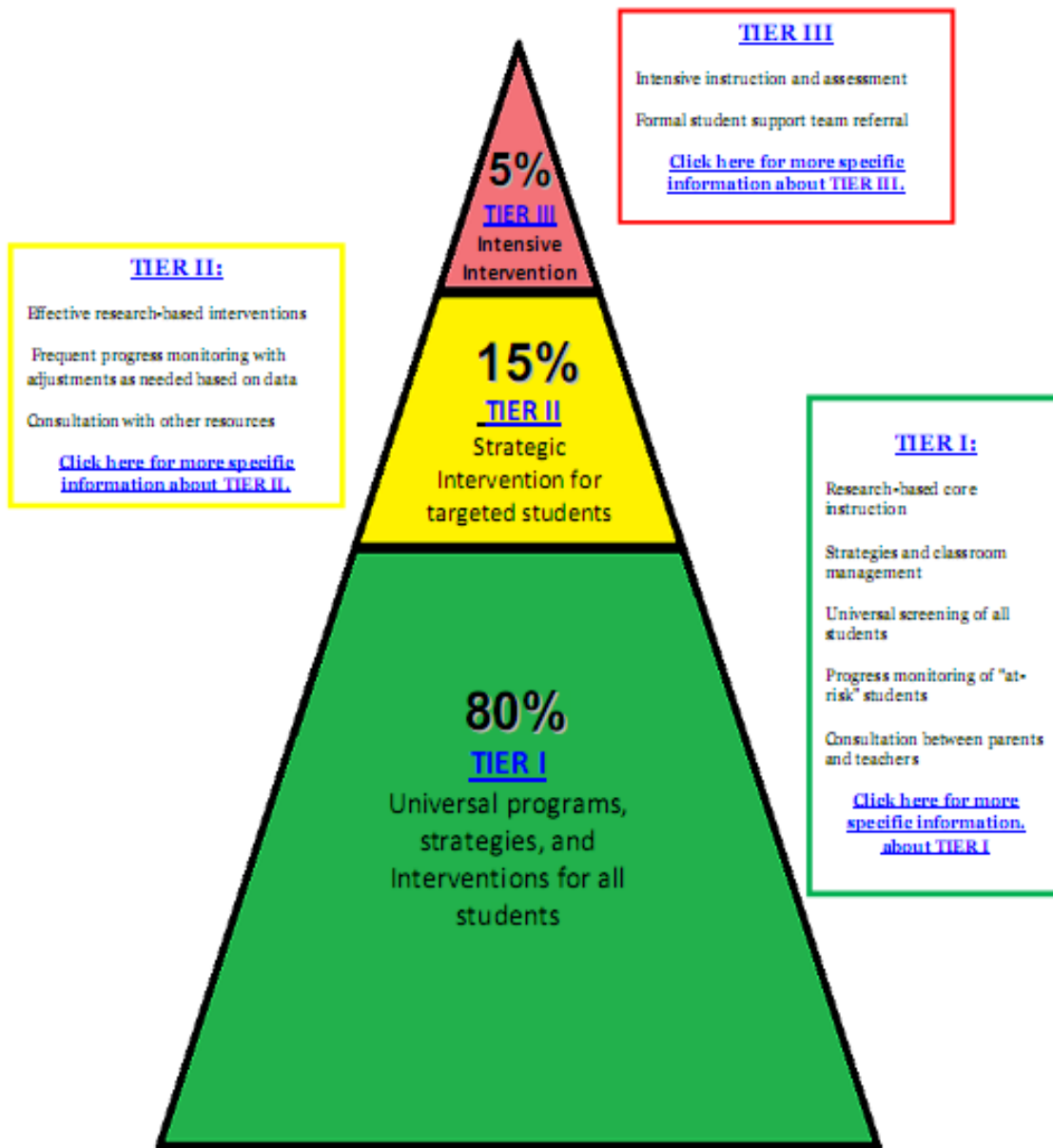


Figure 4. The Instructional Support Model.

As the three tiers provide the framework for RtI, there are four key practices leading to effective RtI implementation (IDEA Partnership @ NASDSE, 2010). The four practices include:

1. Using proven, research-based instruction and interventions (both in the classroom and in small group instruction).
2. Monitoring student progress (use of a systemic approach for assessing student progress to inform instruction).
3. Making instructional decisions based on data.
4. Using assessments for screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostics (to identify students in need of intervention, to monitor response/lack thereof to specific interventions/diagnostics to determine intervention type and to aid in team decision-making).

Those students who do not respond to the higher-tiered intervention approaches, may, ultimately at least in the state of North Carolina, be referred for formal assessment to determine the existence of a disability. Eventually, these students may be determined, based on resistance to specific and on-going levels of academic intervention, to be deemed as having a specific learning disability or to be entitled to being considered as a student possessing a disability.

This process of reaching the Exceptional Education entitlement differs significantly from the previously used intellectual-achievement discrepancy method. In this methodology, often deemed the *wait to fail* approach, only permitted students would receive additional academic support through Exceptional Education programming when an observed deficiency could be demonstrated over time. Teachers were expected to work through Student Support Teams and implement pre-referral interventions whose

outcomes seemed aligned only with generalities and often teacher expectation and experience. The Student Support Team referral was conducted when the teacher was not seeing growth in a student's academic skill acquisition. Subsequently, formal assessment followed unsuccessfully implemented, often vague, and non-specific pre-referral interventions. Placement or eligibility was based upon a discrepancy between expected (based on formalized testing) and actual achievement. G. Reid Lyon of the National Institute of Child and Human Development suggested that the discrepancy model of learning disability identification had become "a sociological sponge to wipe up the spills of general education" (Gresham, MacMillan, & Bocian, 1996, p. 573).

Benefits of Implementation with Fidelity

If a strong RtI program is implemented with fidelity, students will be exposed to quality instruction within an inclusive regular setting through evidence-based instruction and on-going monitoring of student progress. Access to early intervention strategies is encouraged by the process, since the framework is already in place to support struggling students. The design of RtI addresses students with achievement problems. The identification of disabilities, then, can be based upon students who fail to respond to increasingly intensive interventions rather than constricting the eligibility to a point in time (National Research Center on Learning Disabilities, 2005).

"RtI is the practice of providing high quality instruction/intervention matched to students' needs and using learning rate over time and the level of performance to make important educational decisions to guide instruction" (National Reading Panel, 2000, p.

87). In *Dimensions of Learning*, Robert Marzano discusses that the use of research-based strategies implemented within the classroom where differentiation already exists reduces the need for interventions (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Differentiated instruction involves the use of teaching to different learning styles and using a variety of teaching methodology in order to impact all students. “When teachers differentiate instruction, 80 to 90% of students successfully meet achievement benchmark expectations” (Hanson, 2009, p. 4). Similarly, Response to Intervention techniques support the reduction of diverse students being identified as having a disability (Klotz & Canter, 2007). Also, progress monitoring processes used as a part of the RtI procedures provide more instructionally relevant information than do traditional assessment processes.

Implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) requires that specific issues be addressed in order for the process to be effective. There must be planning, collaboration, strong leadership with schools being able to offer a variety of instructional-based strategies that are proven through research to be effective. Some states have developed RtI implementation guides which provide rubrics for classroom level, school level, and district level overview for implementation.

Colorado has defined specific growth stages of implementation. These stages can be summarized as (a) Emerging-building consensus for implementation, (b) Developing-designing infrastructure to implement RtI, (c) Operationalizing-implementation of structures developed during the developing stage and works to build consistency and

fidelity, and (d) Optimizing-the RtI model becomes imbedded into classroom/school/district process with fidelity. Effectiveness is monitored with modifications and changes implemented based upon outcomes (Colorado Department of Education, 2010).

In addition, Colorado identifies essential components to the implementation of RtI which can fall along the phased continuum (Emerging, Developing, Operationalizing, Optimizing). These components demonstrate the extensiveness of the evolution of the cultural change that RtI implementation involves at all levels of the educational system: Leadership, Problem-solving, Curriculum and Instruction, Assessment, Positive School Climate, and Family and Community Partnering. Similarly, three anchor standards are identified within each component: (a) Structures--pieces of the RtI model that are stable and do not change, (b) Processes and Procedures--the parts of an RtI model that are fluid and involve inter-relationships with the structures, and (c) Professional Development--the skills taught to the staff and the way in which the skills are used and monitored (Colorado Department of Education, 2011).

Staff training in the implementation of strategies and in the measurement of student progress is essential. On-going support and monitoring are vital, particularly to teachers, for the process to be effective. Parent partnership in understanding this new process and procedure provides additional support for it being successful (Klotz & Canter, 2007).

In *The Two Models of RtI: Standard Protocol and Problem-Solving*, Shapiro describes the two models of RtI implementation: standard and problem-solving (Shapiro,

2009). Standard protocol involves the delivery of research-based, multiple component programs focusing on specific skill deficits. Here, the intervention has prescribed steps that should result in achievement growth. These processes are typically implemented in small groups identified by matching student problems to the protocol. Often these interventions are commercial, standardized programs with scripted design of implementation which increases fidelity. The Standard Protocol within RtI involves standard instruction being administered in medium-sized groups (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004). The primary advantage of this is that a standardized approach to intervention implementation increases quality control and allows for schools to identify a small pool of effective intervention strategies that can be drawn from a teacher's toolkit and used with multiple students demonstrating common academic needs.

In contrast, the problem-solving process emphasizes individual interventions that are derived from evaluating skill deficits and external conditions such as instructional techniques (Tilly, Reschly, & Grimes, 1999). The goal of the problem-solving process is to identify specific skill deficits to be matched with appropriate intervention (Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz, 2004). If implemented with integrity, the problem-solving method can be effective (Burns & Symington, 2002). However, the problem-solving model can require either an increase in personnel to provide the small group interventions; if not creative scheduling would need to occur in order to meet the needs of all students.

In truth, the combining of a Standard Protocol and Problem Solving model, if possible to implement in a school, is likely to lead to the greatest responsiveness of students. The hybrid approach to RtI would offer the best of worlds for

students—clear and well designed standard protocols in which the large majority of students at some risk would respond and a more finely tuned, focused intervention built on the identified individualized needs of students who are in need of more intensive instructional interventions (Shapiro, 2009, p. 43).

Teachers, therefore, are the “front-line” for successful RtI implementation.

Within the regular education environment, there are expectations for classroom differentiation and individualization if intervention development and implementation.

Again, teacher attitude and skill-set can drive the success of RtI implementation.

Instruction, a Vital Component to Response to Intervention

Teaching is a complex task that requires knowledge, adaptability, and an ability to integrate multiple activities with a wide range of students. Hollins (2011) identified components necessary for an effective teacher: (a) knowledge of human growth and development (learners), (b) an understanding of the learning process (learning), (c) skills in adapting discipline-specific information to diverse learners (subject), (d) an understanding of learning pedagogy, (e) identifying and developing appropriate classroom assessment practices (accountability and assessment), and (f) an ability to maintain an evolving self through on-going acquisition of skills. The features of effective teaching and instruction are integral into building and strengthening capacity towards successful RtI implementation.

Key elements to effective instruction begin with explicit instruction.

Explicit instruction is a systematic instructional approach that includes a set of delivery and design procedures derived from effective schools research merged with behavior analysis. There are two essential components to well designed

explicit instruction: (a) visible delivery features are group instruction with a high level of teacher and student interactions, and (b) the less observable, instructional design principles and assumptions that make up the content and strategies taught. (Hall, 2002, p. 2)

Explicit instruction is described as overtly teaching each step through teacher modeling and the use of many examples.

Tier II interventions include (a) explicit instruction of skills (e.g., pro-social skills, academic skills), (b) structured prompts for appropriate behavior, (c) opportunities for the student to practice new skills in the natural setting, and (d) frequent feedback to the student. (Anderson, 2010, p. 34)

Whether teaching reading instruction or behavioral control, the same process of explicit instruction is utilized.

Systematic instruction is the second element of effective instruction.

The plan for systematic instruction is carefully thought out, strategic and designed before activities and lessons are developed. Systematic instruction is clearly linked within, as well as across the five major areas of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). For systematic instruction, lessons build on previously taught information, from simple to complex, with clear, concise student objectives that are driven by ongoing assessment. Students are provided appropriate practice opportunities which directly reflect instruction. (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2012, p. 2)

Systematic can be described as the breaking down of lessons and activities into sequential, manageable learning “chunks.” Ample practice opportunities and immediate feedback provision are the final elements of effective instructional practice.

The intent, therefore, of RtI is to use well-designed and well-implemented early intervention to address student issues (Adelman & Taylor, 2012). The data derived from on-going assessment can provide guidance as to whether the student is responding to the intervention appropriately. The approach is also intended to minimize the numbers of students requiring referral for and/or identification as possessing a disability. The goal of RtI is to develop as many strategic plans for students within the regular classroom setting under a highly qualified instructor as a means of offsetting identification of disabled students inappropriately when they may simply require additional or more focused instructional strategies.

One of the concerns noted is that there is system supervision and support to ensure that classroom teachers implement these well-designed interventions to fidelity and that other school staff can learn how to support this role of instructional intervention if needed. However, even with expansive staff development regarding effective teaching and intervention implementation, there remain a group of students who may not respond to this process of instruction.

A core difficulty here is that of mobilizing unmotivated students (and particularly those who have become actively disengaged from classroom instruction). If motivational considerations are not effectively addressed, there is no way to validly address whether or not a student has a true disability or disorder. (Adelman & Taylor, 2012, p. 2)

Response to Intervention/Instruction can be most effective when not only direct instruction is considered but also a wide comprehensive system of learning supports

focused on whole child issues are imbedded into the school system culture. As an example, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) frames a school climate within the context of promoting social/emotional development and reducing learning, behavioral, and emotional problems through effective re-engagement in the classroom.

Harlacher and Siler (2011) identified factors related to successful RtI implementation through an expansive review of the literature. While states and districts identified various key components to the RtI process, three were identified as common components comprising any RtI model: (a) a comprehensive assessment system, (b) research-based instruction with varied layers of intensity, and (c) the use of the problem-solving model (Shinn, 2008).

Tilly (2008) recognized that RtI requires school staff members to acquire a range of skills so that effective professional development is necessary for successful implementation. It was identified that professional development should be ongoing, structured, and deliberate (Batsche et al., 2007) including coaching, opportunities to practice, high quality instruction, various assessment techniques, and how to use data to drive instruction. Staff development will require extensive planning, monitoring, and follow-up.

Staff buy-in was the next most reported factor to successful RtI implementation. Staff buy-in can be described as the staff's willingness to implement new practices associated with RtI and includes communication between staff and leadership.

Part of the buy-in process should include an understanding that additional support is provided earlier, is more targeted to students' need compared to previous models of service delivery, and that the goal of any intervention or instructional strategy is to correct the identified problem, not place the child in special education. (Harlacher & Siler, 2011, p. 21)

Implementation of RtI is a complex process. Understanding the framework of implementation by leaders in schools, who support a team effort and allow for group planning, is essential. Having a site-based expert was identified as very relevant. Principals are in a position to provide not only the drive and expectation but also the authority and potential resources to support effective implementation of RtI (Peterson et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, responses shown in the literature did vary from system to system. The context of the setting may have influenced responses regarding priority factors for successful RtI implementation. School districts with limited financial support may identify the need for time and academic intervention programs as important, while the priorities may differ in more affluent districts where interventions are readily available.

Therefore, investigating what variables impacted the effective implementation of the North Carolina state RtI process in rural school districts could provide guidance for other districts struggling in its implementation. Chapter III will describe the process of investigation used in this research project.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Background and Framework

Response to intervention (RtI) is the exercise of the provision of quality core instruction. Progress monitoring allows for directing more focused interventions to struggling students (NASDE, 2005). The process of implementation and outcome of RtI has been cited as a promising approach to improving student outcomes through a consistent student need matched to intervention process. It can also, through regulation, be used as an alternative methodology for identifying students with disabilities (IDEIA). Since the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) reauthorization in 2004, allowing states to use the RtI process to identify students with disabilities, an increased interest and support of this process has occurred. While some studies have been conducted regarding implementation in urban school systems and in individual school sites, limited research has been conducted about how school districts approach this policy.

The intent of this research was to investigate the perspectives and practices of the central office leadership in two identified rural school systems' implementation of the state Responsiveness to Instruction (RtI) process. The project sought to explore the guidance and supervision provided to schools regarding RtI implementation and the

subsequent perspectives of school staff regarding the central office leadership process.

Specifically, the project sought to answer the following questions:

1. How has the school district leadership led the implementation of RtI?
2. What are the pragmatics specific to RtI implementation in rural school districts?
3. How do school-based personnel interpret the guidance from district-level regarding RtI implementation?
4. What specific strategies/interventions are developed to meet the unique needs of the rural student?

Methodology Justification

A case study using two rural school districts as sites of research was determined to be an effective method of data collection regarding the process of RtI implementation. Because the implementation of federal legislation is a complicated process affected by a myriad of variables, the case study would allow for the gathering of information related to specific procedures and perspectives that drove effective execution of RtI. By accessing evidences through personal interview and document review in these rural settings, the research could elicit processes that could be replicated elsewhere resulting in stellar implementation.

The case study method of research has typically been utilized in a range of social science, health care, legal, and educational arenas. According to Yin (2003, p. 2), “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social

phenomena” because “the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events,” such as developing or evolving processes. “Case studies commonly explore, describe or explain the case of interest and enable holistic and meaningful context-constituted knowledge and understanding of real life events” (Yin, 2003, p. 2). Case study can also be used to evaluate or analyze commonly occurring/rarely occurring or single-case phenomena (Langford, 2001). In either approach, the case study is conducted in real-life settings where the case study occurs in natural settings, since the context of the situation is typically relevant (Yin, 2003).

Qualitative case study is an approach to research that provides a mechanism by which a phenomenon can be explored within its context using a variety of data sources. The multiple data sources allow for collection of a range of perspectives to be communicated and subsequently understood. Yin (2003) focuses his case study approach on the allowance for the researcher to explore the setting of the investigatory system. Yin supports the use of a case study when certain conditions are met:

- (a) the focus of the study is to answer how /why questions,
 - (b) those in the study cannot be manipulated,
 - (c) conditions need to be explained because they are relevant to the study,
 - (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context
- (Yin, 2003, p. 4)

Therefore, Yin supports the use of educated objectivity in case study research so that a level of understanding is developed as to why the participant acted as s/he did based on the environmental context in which s/he exists.

While research often focuses on answering the questions of who, what, where, how much, and how many (as in a survey), case studies are preferred when the rendering of how or why questions are posed. The case study is also an appropriate approach when case events cannot be controlled and the setting is in a real-life context. Case studies seek to have an overall understanding of the phenomenon.

Case studies search for new variables and questions for further research. The researcher remains an observer in the process, seeking to fulfill the ability to render relevant outcomes that can describe, understand, or explain through data collection (Tellis, 1997). The case study also involves an in-depth description and interpretation of a single case where the case can be defined as a group, entity of interest, or situation rather than simply the focus of an individual. Multiple methods can be used to gather information for case studies such as field notes, observations, structured interviews, conversations, and document analysis. The method chosen by the researcher is based on the approach, questions being posed, and position of the researcher in relation to that being research.

The use of a multi-site case study is an example of a collective case study which attempts to reveal, then understand “any noticeable patterns or regularities” in an ongoing process, program, and/or activity (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 430). The collective or

multi-site case study allowed for perspectives from multiple schools to be analyzed at the same time as a means to make conclusions on an overall process or program.

The focus of the study was to gather information related to the implementation of the Response to Intervention or the Responsiveness to Instruction model, as it is denoted in North Carolina, in two rural school systems in south-central North Carolina. The intent was to gather information including system philosophies, documents, and processes involved in each school system's implementation of their own RtI process. The goal was to assess the components of RtI and their implementation and to delineate individual components and glean recommendations for other school systems.

Location—Districts

This project identified two North Carolina school districts appropriate for the study. A list of North Carolina school districts noted to be stellar in their state RtI implementation process was obtained from the NCDPI state RtI consultants. The districts studied were identified through the outcome of an implementation survey conducted by the North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI) and observational information gathered by the NCDPI consultants from regional implementation meetings and school district site visits. The results of the NCDPI survey are available to the public through the Response to Intervention (RtI) consultants who facilitated the process. The NCDPI consultants, using the combined survey information as well as observational data regarding process and procedure of Response to Intervention (RtI) implementation through regional meetings and site visits, identified a group of districts as demonstrating

characteristics of stellar implementation. Then, the resulting pool of effective implementing districts was narrowed by focusing on those identified as rural districts. Those districts were deemed rural based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). Once the listing was again narrowed, a realistic geographic parameter was established based on my ability to travel on multiple occasions to the districts. In analyzing the demographic characteristics of the districts, I opted to align with districts that exemplified the diversity of rural districts in the state of North Carolina. By gathering data from dissimilar districts, the results derived might be applicable to more settings.

The first two districts fitting the diversity criterion agreed to participate. The district leadership communicated agreement for participation in the study and rendered permission in writing to me. It was agreed that pseudonyms would be used for the district, schools, and personnel in order to maintain confidentiality of responses.

District Lots of Land

District Lots of Land is a geographically large (nearly 600 square miles) district with a total county population of about 122,000 persons. The county school system consists of 23 schools with a total student population of nearly 20,000. Specifically, the district is composed of 16 elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools. The free and reduced lunch percentage of the district is 55%. The school district is self-described to be the fifth fastest growing districts in the state, adding nearly 800 students per year for an overall population growth of 6.5% within the county. Of the

9,500 students in the 17 kindergarten through fifth grades, 6,000 are considered to be low-income based upon free and reduced lunch data. All of the elementary schools have a free and reduced lunch percentage of above 35%, with over half above 70%, and the elementary school with the highest poverty level is at 83.36%. The percentage of persons living below the poverty level in the county falls at 16.9%.

The context of District Lots of Land remains rural, yet it battles to maintain a central identity due to the influx of a range of students from varied backgrounds and experiences. These changes resulting from growth impact relationships within and between cultural groups and have altered the appearance of these rural schools (Rural School and Community Trust, 2011).

District Small Spaces

District Small Spaces is a rural district located within a geographically medium-sized (nearly 300 square miles) county with a population of about 36,000 persons. In comparison to District Lots of Land, it is about half the size with about a third of the population. District Small Spaces exemplifies the other type of contrasting rural district that is experiencing a loss of population rather than a growth in population brought about by loss of employment opportunities within the county (Rural School and Community Trust, 2011). The demographic information of District Small Spaces's county population decreased slightly between 2010 and 2012, and around 30% of the county population lives below the poverty level.

The county school system consists of thirteen schools with a total student population of nearly 6,000. The free and reduced lunch percentage of the district is 73%. District Small Spaces consists of eight primary/elementary schools and four middle schools. The county has one large high school that has transitioned from being categorized as a single school to being divided into schools within a school and now back to a single high school (2012–13).

The county has over the past few years been identified to have one of the highest unemployment rates in the state due to localized industry loss (Rural School and Community Trust, 2011). Recent data indicated an unemployment rate of nearly 17%. The county demographic statistics are shown to be 46.8% White, 38.9% African American, and 11.3% American Indian, so diversity impacts the schools as well. A subsequent decrease in a local tax base to support public schools brings about increasing stress, as the schools contemplate how to maintain appropriate instruction and resources with less funding.

Location—Schools

The district leadership in both District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces recommended specific school sites to be interviewed. The administrators understood that I was seeking elementary, middle, and high school perspectives on the state RtI implementation process. They directed me to sites they felt were implementing RtI effectively and might be amenable to being interviewed. In District Small Spaces, the administrator called schools to create awareness of the project and my potential call prior

to my making contact. In District Lots of Land, my phone call to the school was the initial contact. Interviews were conducted with building-level support at prearranged times as to not detract from instruction.

District Lots of Land School Sites

The elementary school to which I was directed in District Lots of Land was an elementary school (pre-k to fifth grade) of 711 students with 38 homeroom teachers and 19 special area teachers that will be called Growing Elementary (see Figure 5). The school is designated as school-wide Title I. The free and reduced lunch percentage is 69%. Demographically, the student population is 53% White, 32% Hispanic, 10% Black, and 3% of mixed race. Diversity is a challenge this school is facing. Student End-of-Grade scores in reading and in math fall below state average scores, with specific weaknesses shown in the overall achievement of student with disabilities and Hispanic students in reading.

School Sites		
	District Lots of Land	District Small Spaces
Elementary	Growing Elementary	Winter Primary
		Valley Elementary
Middle	Expanding Middle	Stable Middle
High	Increasing High	Single High

Figure 5. School Sites Used in Interview Process.

The Middle School in District Lots of Land will be called Expanding Middle School (see Figure 5). It currently is serving over 1,200 students in grades six through eight with demographic percentages ranging from 56% White, 22% Black, 18% Hispanic, 2% mixed races, and 1% American Indian. The free and reduced lunch percentage is 52%. Student scores fell below state averages in all grade-levels, with economically disadvantaged students showing the highest achievement lags. Its student population outgrew the building capacity one year after its completion (six years ago), and Expanding Middle School will be adding six teachers to its staff of 80 during the 2013 to 2014 school year.

Increasing High is the high school visited in District Lots of Land (see Figure 5). Increasing serves about 1,200 students in grades nine through twelve. The school has a 47% free and reduced lunch rate. The student population is 57% White, 23% Black, 15% Hispanic, 3% mixed races, and 1% American Indian.

District Small Spaces School Sites

In District Small, I was directed to two elementary school sites that had been contacted by the district administrator for possible participation. Valley Primary is a pre-k to third grade school of 374 students. The school has an 85% free and reduced rate. Demographically, its population is 49% Black, 25% White, 17% American Indian, 5% mixed races, and 4% Hispanic. Additionally, Winter Elementary is a pre-k to fifth grade school of about over 800 students (see Figure 5).

Valley Elementary has a 58% free and reduced lunch rate with a very diverse student body. The student demographics include 50% Black, 35% White, 5% American Indian, 4% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 2% mixed races.

The middle school site in District Small to which I was directed was Stable Middle School (see Figure 5). This school serves slightly over 500 students in grades six through eight. The school has an 80% free and reduced lunch rate. Student diversity is reported to be 48% Black, 31% White, 15% American Indian, 2% Hispanic, 2% mixed races, and 1% Asian.

Finally, the Single High School in District Small serves about 1,700 students. It has undergone organizational changes moving from a school within a school concept back to a large-scale school serving grades nine through 12. Single High School has a 76% free and reduced lunch rate with student diversity data that shows 50% Black, 38% White, 8% American Indian, 2% Hispanic, and 2% mixed races.

Participants

The two districts identified to fit the constructs of rural and demonstrating stellar RtI implementation processes both agreed to allow interviews to be conducted at various sites throughout their Local Educational Unit (LEA). A letter of affirmation was obtained from a central office administrator in both districts. Telephone and email contacts were made with individuals within schools denoted by district leadership to have working knowledge of the specifics of RtI implementation through the site-based administration.

A total of interviews with 16 school personnel were conducted in order to gain perspectives on state RtI implementation between the two rural school districts, District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces. In Lots of Land, two individuals per academic level were interviewed—elementary, middle, and high—as well as one individual from the District Administration for a total of seven interviews in that respective district. In Small Spaces, four primary/elementary staff, two middle school staff, two high school staff and one central office administrator was interviewed for a total of nine interviews in that district. Fourteen of the respondents were female, and two of the respondents were male. Fourteen of the respondents were White, while two of the respondents were Black.

Specific school staff members who participated in this research were recruited in various ways. In District Small Spaces, the district administrator who coordinated RtI made an initial contact to each school and spoke with the building principal. The building principal or the designee subsequently suggested personnel that would provide relevant feedback to an interview regarding RtI implementation. Therefore, my initial contact by phone and email with the principal allowed the process of identification of interviewees to progress rapidly. A phone call and email was subsequently made with the designated staff persons. Once contact was made and the recruitment email was read and understood based on participant oral feedback, appointments were scheduled in order to do specific interviews. Interviews were conducted with building-level support at pre-arranged times as to not detract from instruction. Pseudonyms were used for all participants in order to maintain confidentiality of responses.

Participants—District Lots of Land

In District Lots of Land, the Title I Director served as the district coordinator for RtI and fulfilled the district-level respondent role in the interview process (see Figure 6). Mrs. Green was an educator with 16 years of educational experience. She transitioned from interim Title I Director to Title I Director during the 2012–2013 school year. Prior to that, Mrs. Green served as a classroom teacher and Reading Recovery teacher.

The Growing Elementary School served as the elementary-level site in the large rural district where interviews were conducted. This is the sixth year for state RtI implementation in this site. Interviewees there were Mrs. Woods, Assistant Principal, and Mrs. Group, Literacy and Intervention Coach (see Figure 6). Mrs. Woods had served as Assistant Principal for three years, while Mrs. Group was in her first year in the role of the Literacy and Intervention Coach.

District Lots of Land Interviews	
<u>Level</u>	<u>Position / Pseudonym</u>
Growing School	Assistant Principal / Mrs. Woods
	Literacy& Intervention Coach / Ms. Group
Expanding Middle School	Instructional Coach / Mrs. Language
	Seventh Grade Counselor / Ms. Support
Increasing High School	Curriculum Director / Mrs. Subject
	High School Counselor / Ms. College
District	Title I / Mrs. Green

Figure 6. Participants in District Lots of Land.

Similarly, at the Expanding Middle School, Mrs. Language, the Instructional Coach, provided feedback on the RtI implementation. Expanding School had been implementing RtI for all six years that Mrs. Language had been employed in the role of Instructional Coach. The seventh-grade counselor, Ms. Support, who worked collaboratively with Mrs. Language, aided in planning student interventions (see Figure 6). Ms. Support had several years experience as an elementary school counselor and brought that experience to the middle school setting. Her area of expertise was in analyzing achievement outcome data derived from ongoing student assessments at her grade level to drive instruction as well as interventions.

Finally, Increasing High School was the location of the high school interview participants. The High School Curriculum Director had only recently moved from a Curriculum Specialist role housed at Increasing High. Mrs. Subject provided her name to the Assistant Principal at the high school to be interviewed after hearing about the request. She reported herself as providing the link between high school curriculum and RtI. Mrs. Subject's focus centered around the gap in the curriculum—between previously taught curriculum and the Common Core curriculum. She felt a dually-based responsibility in working from inside-out to outside-in the voids in instruction and curriculum in the high school setting. Meanwhile, Ms. College was serving as a high school counselor at Increasing High. She had served in this role for five years and also served as the chairperson for the high school problem-solving team. She had worked

with Mrs. Subject frequently on the problem-solving team before her move to oversight of all high school curriculums.

Participants—District Small Spaces

In District Small Spaces, the RtI district coordinator had only recently been appointed this role. Mrs. Davis's job role title was Student Services Coordinator where she had been accustomed to working with Student Support Teams. RtI responsibility had been moved from within the district Exceptional Education Department to the regular education department reflecting the movement that had occurred at the North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI). Mrs. Davis had been functioning in the Student Services Coordinator role for six years prior to assuming the RtI coordinating responsibility. She had limited understanding of curriculum-based issues but was described to be a wonderful support and problem-solver if site-based RtI implementation issues arose.

Valley Elementary is a large elementary school in District Small Spaces where Principal Consistency and Curriculum Facilitator Buy-In had both served in their subsequent roles for five years (see Figure 7). The consistency and duration of the building leadership team had afforded the school personnel to adapt and to understand administrative expectation regarding instruction. Their teaming and differentiated roles in leadership (Principal: expected outcomes) and (Curriculum Facilitator: academic instruction and intervention facilitation) supported the philosophy that all instructional decisions are about teaching and learning.

District Small Spaces Interviews	
<u>Level</u>	<u>Position / Pseudonym</u>
Valley Elementary (Site I)	Principal / Mrs. Consistency
	Curriculum Facilitator / Mrs. Buy-in
Winter Primary (Site II)	Principal / Mr. Beach
	Curriculum Facilitator / Mrs. Core
Stable Middle School	Principal / Mr. Newguy
	Curriculum Facilitator / Mrs. Intervene
Single High School	Assistant Principal / Mrs. Discipline
	High School Counselor / Ms. Transition
District	Student Services / Mrs. Davis

Figure 7. Participants in District Small Spaces.

The interviewees at Winter Primary were the principal and curriculum facilitator (see Figure 7). Principal Beach was retiring in a matter of weeks from the interview date, so although he had a clear understanding of the RtI philosophy, his reliance on the Curriculum Facilitator for actual implementation was admitted during my time spent with him. Subsequently, Curriculum Facilitator Core had served in this capacity for two years at Winter Primary where she had taught previously for a seven-year period. She was frustrated by her perceived instructional impact of the holes in the curriculum being taught and the new Common Core. She felt staff resistance to implementation of the Common Core and partnered with the Assistant Principal in an attempt to hold teachers accountable for their instruction.

Principal Newguy and Curriculum Facilitator Intervene sat for interviews at Stable Middle School (see Figure 7). The principal was completing his first year in the position; he is not a native to the geographical area, so his focus has been on his personal leadership adjustment to the rural setting. While Principal Newguy demonstrated a strong understanding of the state RtI process, he admitted relying on Mrs. Intervene, who had been in the position for three years, for overall implementation at Stable. Both supported the expectation that staff be knowledgeable student academic levels through data outcome. This was aid to be a cultural change for the teachers so that some resistance was noted.

Finally, it was a bit more difficult to access individuals who admitted to possessing significant knowledge about RtI at the high school level. Single High School had undergone a transition from being divided into four schools within a school back to a single high school during this academic year. An Assistant Principal, Mrs. Discipline, agreed to be interviewed as well as an 11th-grade school counselor (see Figure 7).

Mrs. Discipline had a teaching background; she taught elementary school for seven years before transitioning to administration. She served as an assistant principal in two elementary schools for two years each before moving to the high school as an Assistant Principal. Her focus as an administrator was on student needs, although the majority of her time was spent on teacher observation/evaluation and on discipline. The counselor, Ms. College, was in her third year of school counseling. She had taught a range of social studies courses before earning her licensure as a school counselor. Both

Single High School employees were concerned about how the high school would continue the level of academic support with which many of their freshmen were entering the ninth grade. They admitted that they were still using the same Student Support Model of referral and intervention as had been historically used.

Data Collection

Information regarding perceptions of state RtI implementation was gathered through individual interviews in both rural school districts—Lots of Land and Small Spaces. Once an agreed-upon time for the interview was arranged, I drove to the schools to meet with the individuals. Once there, the interviewee read and signed the Adult Consent Form and was given a copy for their reference. I asked if audiotaping would be an acceptable means of securing information from the interview. Every participant agreed to that methodology. Therefore, an audiotape and interview notes were obtained during each interview. If available, hard copy documents were obtained from participants related to the state RtI process.

The District RtI Capacity and Implementation Rubrics were used as the interview protocol with all participants. These instruments were developed by the National Center on Response to Intervention in June 2011 and are available for the public to use. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction also supports the use of these instruments to aid districts in better evaluating where they stand in RtI implementation, as shown on the NCDPI website. In addition, using a second questionnaire created by the National Center on Response to Intervention that focused on the core components of the RtI model, I

explored the specifics of state RtI implementation. The District RtI Essential Components Implementation Integrity Worksheet included questions related to screening tools, curriculum, articulation of teaching and learning, evidence-based instruction, progress monitoring, and decision-making processes. The open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed for participants to expand on the questions, which permitted for more natural responses.

The interview protocols focused on district-level capacity to support RtI implementation and district-wide fidelity of RtI implementation. The areas identified in the District RtI Capacity Building Worksheet for specific questioning include:

Vision and Goals: (example questions)

1. What are your vision and goals for RtI implementation?
2. How do you share the vision and goals with other district and school staff?
3. Describe your dissemination plan.

Outreach and Consensus Building: (example questions)

1. How do you obtain input on stakeholder needs and desires?
2. Is there a process for maintaining a consensus and support for RtI implementation activities? Please describe.

Essential Components: (example questions)

1. To what extent do team members understand RtI and its essential components?

2. To what extent have you disseminated the components of the district's RtI framework?

Executive Leadership: (example questions)

1. Describe the RtI knowledge of top leadership.
2. To what extent has top leadership become involved in decisions about RtI implementation?

Leadership Team: (example questions)

1. Who are the members of the district leadership team?
2. To what extent do the team and its members have authority over decisions about district-wide RtI implementation?

Action Plan: (example questions)

1. What plans are in place to support initial implementation of RtI?
2. How do you monitor, refine or evaluate plans?

Written Guidance: (example questions)

1. Describe the extent to which you define the district RtI conceptual framework or model.
2. What technical assistance activities are you providing sites to support implementation?

Monitoring: (example questions)

1. To what extent are you monitoring implementation?
2. How is the district sustaining monitoring efforts?

The data were collected towards the end of the academic year, so it appeared that the individuals who were interviewed were eager to talk through their process of/status in implementation. The interview process seemed to be a cathartic synthesis of analyzing and reflecting upon that which was working well and that which was not working effectively. Participants signed a written consent form that explained the process in detail. Audio taping and subsequent transcriptions of the interviews were made in order to reference not only details across participants within districts but also across participants between districts. Pseudonyms were used in place of actual district names. Additionally, pseudonyms were used in place of school building names as well as individuals in order to maintain participant confidentiality. Approximately a day after the interview, the participants were mailed a hand-written note of thanks with a \$20 gift card enclosed.

Data Analysis

I transcribed each audiotape of the interviews, which resulted in about 20 pages per interview for a total of about 300 pages of type-written responses to questions. The transcription analysis was conducted by hand, allowing for me to review the interview, to hear the verbal tones in responses, and recall the participants' feelings as they were interviewed. Since perception is an important and relevant part of this study, I believe it is important to understand not simply what the participants said in response to the questions, but to understand the context in which the responses were given.

Additionally, I combined the hand-written notes I had taken during the interviews that often included posturing, facial expressions, and additional comments that might have occurred before the tape was turned on or after it was turned off. I compared and contrasted each individual's response to each question across all interviews. Then, I analyzed responses for common or related ideas or thoughts that I designated via highlighting. I compared the dual responses from each setting for similarities and differences based on position or role responsibilities of the respondents and attempted to glean school climate or school philosophy towards state RtI implementation. I also compared perceived District direction given to the schools with perceived communications received and if there were subtle differences therein.

All of the resulting information was analyzed to identify similarities and differences between implementation processes and practices in the two rural school districts. Specific focus was on implementation of a federal policy mandate as it filtered down through state leadership to individual school districts and ultimately specific schools. In looking at how policy is articulated and supported from the state and district, considerations for examining district perceptions and teacher beliefs as mediated by local contexts, such as leadership, professional development, district resources, and teacher buy-in are large components to understanding RtI implementation. Given that variation in RtI implementation is part of each state's developed framework, obtaining insight into two North Carolina rural districts' initiatives as based on local contexts is important and relevant for understanding how policy informs local educational practice.

Subjectivity

I acknowledge that as a researcher I possess subjectivity based on my background, personal experience, and professional experience having just retired from public schools after a 32-year career. I am a white female, a mother, a wife, and have always been employed in rural economically disadvantaged school districts in North Carolina. My educational focus has always been on the underachieving student and how the school system could better support him/her. I have been exposed to the makings of federal legislation due to my husband's employment in Congress and how the pragmatics of a piece of legislation and its ultimate implementation may not be matched to its intended outcome. My views are filtered by my training as a school psychologist where I was initially exposed to a framework of a Response to Intervention process over 30 years ago. Throughout my school career, however, I never experienced the logical concept of early interventions with students come to full fruition consistently and with fidelity.

My views are also impacted by my personal experience in attempting to collaboratively implement RtI in a highly resistant poor rural district over a range of about eight years. While my perceptions of North Carolina's inconsistent and confusing roll-out of the state RtI process are not positive (see Figure 1), I was able to table those emotions as an interviewer while interpreting interview responses. It was not difficult to keep my own opinions out of the data as I reviewed transcriptions and grouped responses into categories. I recognize that participants experienced their own situation with their

own opinions based on their own experiences. I also realize another interviewer may have organized and analyzed specific interview responses differently.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is another important component of this study. The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). It would have been helpful to corroborate my data collection by collecting additional interviews, particularly at the teacher level. Member checking was offered to allow participants to review the transcripts to ensure an accurate interpretation of what was recorded. However, no participants wanted to check on the data. They did have post-transcription discussion either by phone or by email with the interviewer related to the general themes of their responses. I should have been more assertive in requiring the member checking to occur. A description of the interview responses is available in the results section of this study including direct quotations. The actual audiotapes, transcripts, and analyses will be maintained in a secure location for minimally three years following the project.

Benefits

Participants may benefit from this study, because they will be able to assess their perceptions of RtI implementation against the realities of what is occurring in their school. School districts may also benefit from this study, particularly if they are rural schools and need to implement a federal mandate. Risks may have been a component of this study. Even though pseudonyms for districts, schools, and participants were used, it

might be possible to deduce a respondent based on size of district and limited personnel in specific roles. Nonetheless, confidentiality was assured participants, and all audio-tapes, transcripts, and interview analyses will be maintained securely.

Limitations

This study may be limited by interviews being used as the primary source of data collection. While interviewees may have expressed how they supported implementation of RtI, it was not possible to obtain much documented/printed evidence related to the processes outlined. Observations of grade-level, professional learning communities, or team meetings may have provided significant process information, but due to the timeframe of data collection, this was not possible.

The process of coordinating RtI in a school district or a school appeared to be an expected rather than a highly prioritized role. Therefore, overall system support of the student-centered intervention process requires a collaborative coordination which involves funding, creative scheduling, and curriculum expertise. The implementation of a large philosophical framework cannot be the responsibility of a single individual in a school district or in a school. This process must be a systemic responsibility.

Another limitation of this study is that three of the interview respondents, including both RtI district coordinators, were relatively new to their position responsibilities. Therefore, the depth of their understanding may not be reflective of how an individual with greater experience may have responded.

While this study does examine the process of implementation of RtI in two rural districts in North Carolina, generalizations to a wider grouping of districts cannot be made. However, 16 interviews did yield excellent perspectives and suggestions on what strategies and processes could aid in implementation of RtI.

Since implementation of strategic education reforms within specific school districts as a result of federal legislation can be a challenging process, local perceptions can aid in understanding the complexities of the process, as it filters down from federal to state to local educational units.

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

The research questions posed in this qualitative multi-site case study aimed to explore the process of Response to Intervention (RtI) implementation using the context of two rural school systems in south-central North Carolina. The goal of this research was to explore the filtering of federal legislation through state-level leadership to school district leadership and ultimately to school-site implementation and to identify leadership, guidance, and implementation strategies on RtI implementation that were effective and designed to meet the needs of rural student learners.

It is necessary to explore the information derived from 16 individuals (see Figures 6 and 7 in Chapter 3) interviewed within the two separate districts—District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces—to identify commonalities and differences of perspectives regarding the process of reform implementation.

A Perfect Storm: Multiple Transitions

State Roll-Out

The implementation of state RtI in North Carolina has not been a direct or a smooth one. Under the direction of North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), the process began in the year 2000 (see Figure 1 in Chapter 3) with the main efforts being driven by the Exceptional Education Department. Subsequently five pilot

sites were identified in 2004–2005. The subsequent change in name of the framework from Response to Intervention from Responsiveness to Instruction in 2007 rendered additional confusion for school districts. While the responsibility for oversight of state RtI in 2009 moved within NCDPI from the Exceptional Education Department to the regular education department, the intent of that move was to reinforce that the process was not prerequisite to exceptional education identification. However, it subsequently caused a regrouping and reorganization of administrative responsibilities for RtI in local districts. Finally, in 2011, the change in philosophical model from a four-tier to a three-tier framework caused districts that were in full state RtI implementation to regroup and reorganize their internal processes. The time-line in Figure 1 demonstrates the sequential evolution of RtI in North Carolina. The arrows in Figures 8 and 9, however, trace the multiple transitions that NCDPI and subsequently the school districts they guide experienced over the nine years that state RtI was developing.

Lots of Land District had been designated as a pilot site in 2004 which gave the district personnel the advantage of having a direct relationship established with NCDPI consultants. Nonetheless, the current state RtI Coordinator in Lots of Land District (see Figure 6 in Chapter 3), Mrs. Green, identified the whirlwind of changes occurring with the RtI structure as beneficial to her at the time she assumed responsibility for it, and she took full advantage of the confusion to take leadership that supported the transition in a positive way.

I did look at some notes when I came in. The county was one of the state pilot systems—one of the first to embrace RtI. With that said, I came in at the best possible time with the shift to the three-tier model. It gave me, as the new person involved, an opportunity to communicate the changes and a chance to look at things through a new lens . . . I believe in 2004 this county was one of the pilot sites . . . so this county was fully implementing the four-tier model, although there was significant variance among sites . . . When it was rolled out, it was rolled out from the EC department, as a process for EC. Like a referral model, so . . . this year, in particular, has been challenging, while exciting, to try to undo that mindset . . . the change to the three-tier model allowed us to undo the previous. I don't even think you can call it the misunderstanding. I think it was presented as the intent. We used this last year as an overhaul opportunity with the shift from four to three tiers.

Similarly, Mrs. Woods, Assistant Principal at Growing Elementary School, echoed the sentiment regarding the changing RtI guidelines and positioning.

This is about the sixth year in progress. This is probably our best year so far. It has been trial and error. We try to disseminate information as quickly as we can. You know the county and state keep kind of changing things, you know. We have gone from Dibels and Aimsweb. The only thing I feel that has been successful I this school, I feel, has been that our staff is truly dedicated to student learning. Our problem-solving team is strong. It has been more enhanced, which I did not think was possible.

This myriad of transitions led to confusion and frustration among personnel in districts, particularly those that had not been state RtI pilot sites, and therefore, did not have direct connections with NCDPI personnel. Mrs. Davis, Coordinator for RtI in District Small Spaces, indicated that since 2005 the leadership for state RtI in the district had been the responsibility of the Exceptional Education Department, mirroring the state's leadership. The transition of RtI back to the Student Support occurred in late 2011.

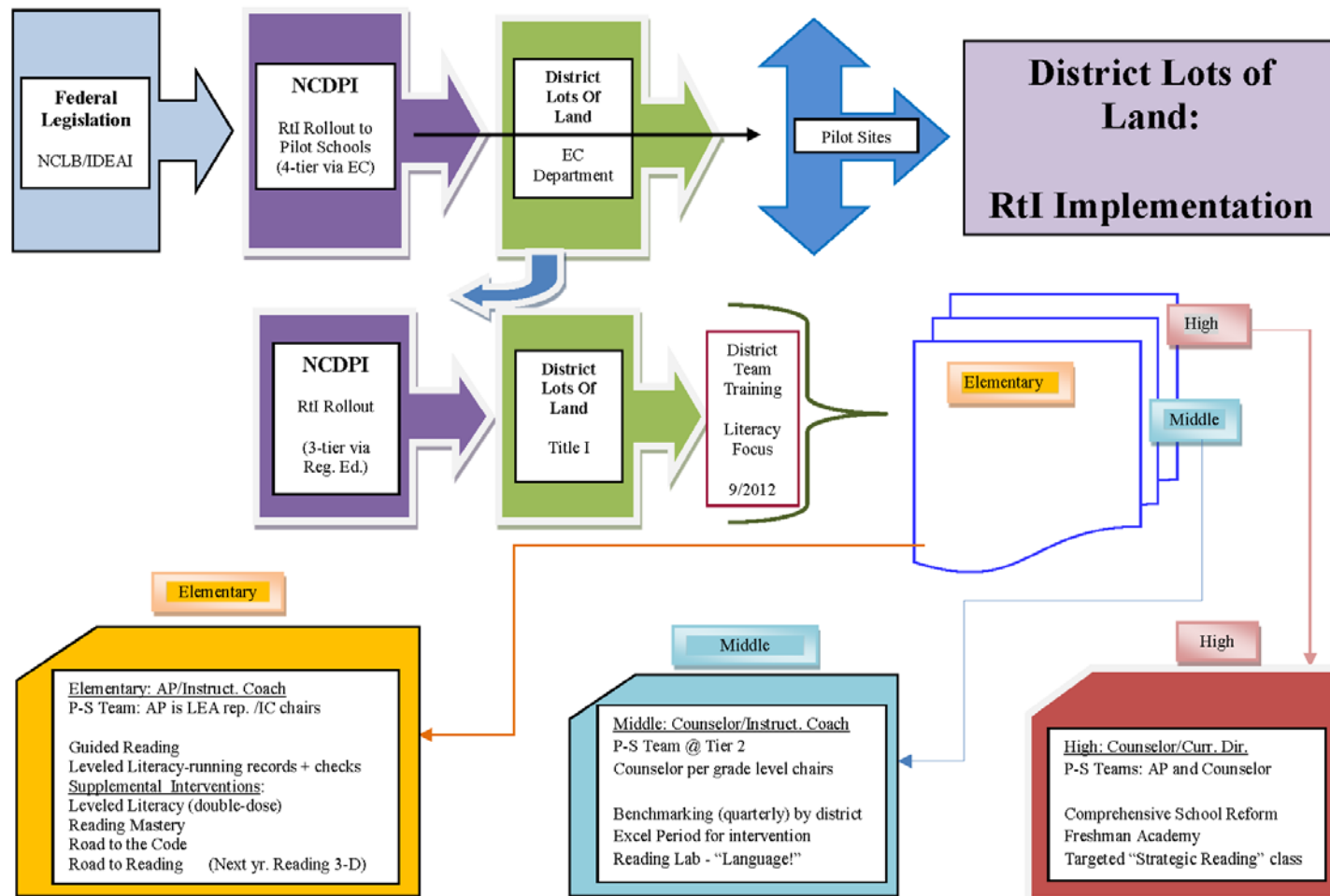


Figure 8. District Lots of Land RtI Implementation

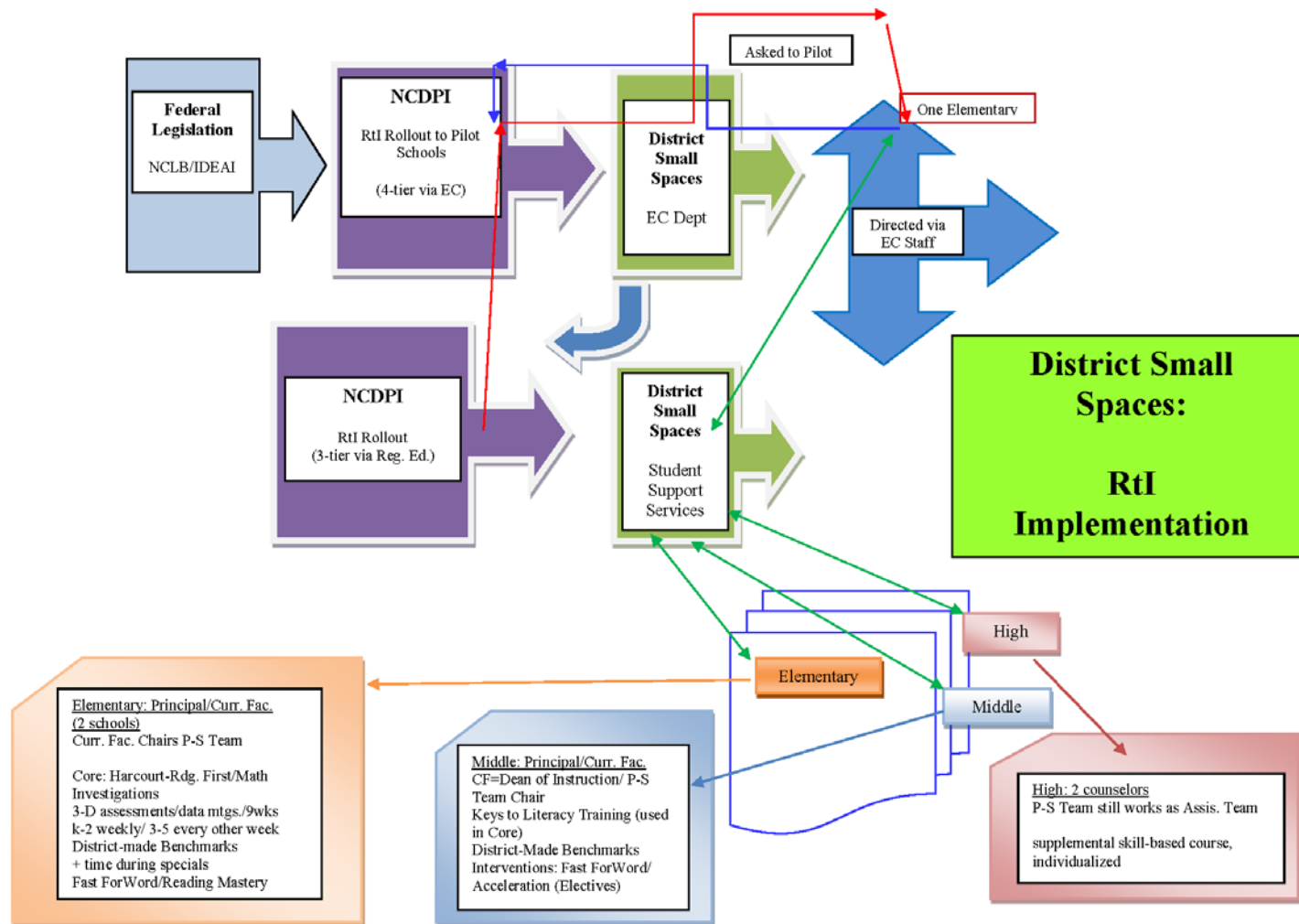


Figure 9. District Small Spaces RtI Implementation

Two of our elementary schools truly had sensational processes in place prior to the change from the four-tier to the three-tier process. This county uses a site-based leadership style. Process initiation is left up to the principal, and more recently, the principal and the curriculum facilitator. Schools call us in for back-up only, and I have been trying to get up to par on the whole RtI thing. There hasn't been much direct-process training for Student Support folks by the state, so I have tried to learn from our schools that have been actively engaged in developing and redeveloping their RtI process. I have supported the continued use of a common-colored RtI folder (purple) for housing paperwork, and we have opted to use the state paperwork.

Without clear direction or direct alignment to NCDPI, Mrs. Davis has relied upon acquiring information from the schools with whom she works (see double-ended arrows in Figure 9 between schools and Mrs. Davis). When Valley Elementary requested the NCDPI RtI consultant to do site-based staff training, Mrs. Davis attended.

I really felt like an intruder in that training. Their conversations were what they were supposed to be—data-driven, and I was lost. I understand about student needs and the general RtI philosophy, but I am not a curriculum expert. That is not my background. I am on the opposite end of the organization from curriculum, and let's say, we don't connect much. A team effort seems like the best way to implement RtI.

Mrs. Davis recognized that there was still confusion within the district. She mentioned that “less than half of the teaching staff see RtI as a prevention program” and that there existed “the need for district support for increased awareness and training about RtI.” The administrator also added, “without an agreed upon focus, where all sides of the district leadership accept ownership in this process, I am the lone ranger out here working with specific schools. It is a lonely mission, but the schools keep calling!”

Documentation

In addition to the confusion over who was really ‘in charge’ or RtI driving the philosophical part of the reform, there was also confusion over the pragmatic process of how schools were to document any process of intervention. Mrs. Language from Expanding Middle School said,

One of the issues was the RtI paperwork. We were transitioning from the traditional assistance team to RtI. And then, when the county had PEP’s in place, RtI was supposed to take the place of the PEP. But then the teachers were not understanding how to transition the paperwork from one set of paperwork to the other—with some kids having a PEP and some kids having RtI—it was confusing. With a school this size with a lot of new teachers—it became—and for those who had been forever—that change, you know?

When asked about whether paperwork guidance was provided for the district, Mrs. Green from District Lots of Land, spoke again of a fragmented process, at best. However, District Lots of Land worked collaboratively across departments to facilitate a concrete paperwork process that would not appear to be redundant to teachers. Mrs. Green reviewed their district process:

We provided them the powerpoint we used for training. We used the one DPI had provided for us. We rolled this out—so classic, and after we did our training and rolled out the revised understanding, then the paperwork was released by DPI on RtI. I think that ended up being a blessing for us, because, for years, we utilized the PEP as the RtI paperwork in our district. They designed the PEP to meet the needs of RtI, so the curriculum directors met together and developed our own updated PEP that our Assistant Superintendent who handles PEPs for our district blessed it as the PEP but it could be used as we wanted for RtI.

And back to the paperwork issue, in making them workable for classroom teachers and providing guided support. In the past, paperwork seemed to be

developed for the sake of paperwork. Things seemed to look good on paper, it really wasn't about the student. My goal was to pare down the PEP/RtI paperwork to make it more about progress monitoring, rather than recording things ahead of time—the point is to grow them!

I learned that neither district Lots of Land nor Small Spaces developed any guidebook or manual for their process for RtI implementation. On-line guidance was minimal. The hesitancy to put anything in print may stem from the inconsistent development of RtI rendered by NCDPI and the concern that they might roll-out additional changes.

Recognizing that RtI is a framework and not a model, it can and often does look very different in every school, even within the same school district. This can lead to a concern for students who are transient. Students who move frequently often experience holes in their skills acquired due to missed instruction. It was noted that students transitioning vertically within districts can move to the next level with documentation that the receiving grade levels don't understand. Mr. Newguy, middle school principal in District Small Spaces, commented that

While we get feeder folders that are often filled with RtI documents, we don't have a clear picture of how their processes work, including their instructional practices. We need to have on-going conversations vertically here in District Small Spaces to provide our students the ongoing supports they need.

Core Curriculum

Educators must balance a lot of responsibilities and changes in performing their roles in schools. While state RtI was being repositioned and restructured in late 2011-

2012, the state also opted to initiate the Common Core curriculum. Effective instruction is a key component to stellar RtI implementation. However, with the increased and deeper knowledge curriculum requirements of the Common Core, staff members interviewed expressed concern related to its relationship to the RtI process.

Mrs. Core, the Curriculum Facilitator at Winter Primary in Small Spaces District, expressed particular concern over her feeling that teachers required to be supported, yet held accountable to teaching the core curriculum to students. She expressed worries about the instructional holes in the curriculum being taught and the Common Core.

We just have so many loose holes in what we are teaching students, and I fear it will catch up with all of us. I have been trying to focus on this while supporting RtI implementation, but, as you know, RtI will function if the curriculum is being taught well. It is not in every classroom in this building.

The Instructional Coach at Expanding Middle School in District Lots of Land, Mrs. Language, expressed substantial concern about the learning gaps due to the changed curriculum in North Carolina.

With Common Core, we see some gaps. We are going to have gaps, I say, for at least four to five years. Because the curriculum from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study was so broad—and now we are going to the Common Core, which is very vertically aligned. A lot of this curriculum, which looks like the old curriculum, like what I used to teach when I first started, the kids are not getting this in instruction, especially with the grammar—the literature, not so much, but the instruction needs to go deeper. But the math where the content has moved from one grade level to another grade, the building blocks are popping out—so, that is an issue.

A perfect storm of evolving changing elements within North Carolina public education combined to create confusion and frustration within school staff leadership as well as district leadership as the state RtI process was rolled out over the past nine academic years. The complexity of the philosophical and organizational changes underlying RtI that had to be communicated to and then supported within schools created an overall leadership challenge for all educators involved. In addition, the on-going changing perspective of the structural framework caused frequent major adjustments to the pragmatic implementation or *re-implementation* of RtI: exceptional education to regular education, Response to Intervention to Responsiveness to Instruction, and four-tier to three-tier structure.

Structural Complexity

Another pattern of responses elicited from the 16 interviews regarding RtI implementation identified the complexity of orchestrating the scheduling and arrangement of student interventions. The District Administrator, Mrs. Davis, indicated key factors that impact effective RtI implementation involve a significant change or rethinking in the way resources are allocated.

The logistics of making RtI happen effectively including scheduling and human resources remains with principal requests to the district—schools struggle with implementing evidence-based strategies due to arranging time for the small group focused interventions.

More specifically, Mrs. Consistency, principal at Valley Elementary School in District Small Spaces noted that access to and effective use of resources to support the creation of the intervention schedule is essential to making RtI work effectively.

We have a lot of needs at this school but we do have quite a bit of Title I funding which allows us some flexibility in acquiring resources, such as the Interventionist. The Interventionist position has taken this job role and run with it. She is constantly pouring over paperwork, working the intervention schedule like a jug saw puzzle. Her relations with teachers are great, probably because she doesn't mind pulling up her sleeves and working with students. She models interventions well and actually organizes some of them, complete with monitoring tools.

In addition, a comment by Ms. Group, Literacy and Intervention Coach at Growing School in District lots of Land, explains the technical and organizational skills needed to make an RtI process of interventions work well.

My role would specifically be to keep track of all the data for all the students in the school that are below-level in reading and need interventions. My other role is also to create the groups that they will be pulled out into with their interventions as well as keeping track of how they are doing in the regular classroom. As students meet expectation, we put them back into the regular classroom so that other students needing more intense interventions can get it.

A similar sentiment regarding the strategic complexity of the pragmatic arrangement and scheduling of interventions required under RtI was noted by Mr. Beach, principal at Winter Primary School. His comments described the role of the Curriculum Facilitator, Mrs. Core.

She has a horrific job of trying to develop a puzzle-piece design of intervention group pull-outs. Scheduling is a nightmare, and teachers don't particularly like the intrusion of students coming and going. We try to honor instruction as much as possible, but for students needing a little bit more, it is our responsibility to provide it.

Finally, Mrs. Subject from District Lots of Land, who has served as both a Curriculum Specialist and now Curriculum Director for secondary schools, identifies the difficulty in implementing interventions at the high school setting. Both high schools visited echoed this feeling.

We know how difficult it is to arrange intervention time in a high school schedule, so we have implemented a generalized freshman seminar where some affective interventions and overall orientation is facilitated for first-year students. We use the Strategic Reading Program as a small group intervention for only about 70 students in each of our high schools focused to students who enter with weak reading skills. This is paired with English in the hope that the skills acquired will be practiced . . . we have had limited success with inconsistent results, probably because the program is not individualized enough.

Professional Development

Professional development is crucial to the implementation of strategic educational reform. This training cannot be a one-time deal but requires on-going inoculations of communications among and between teaching staff so that questions and issues can be addressed as they arise. The need for support and professional development opportunities for staff was noted throughout both District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces at all academic levels. The on-going battle funding was identified as an issue as

well as the time to orchestrate and balance the support for RtI implementation with Core Curriculum enhancement.

District Lots of Land used a systemic implementation of Leveled Literacy Interventions that required on-going training for classroom teachers to offset their perception that they were not literacy experts. Mrs. Green, Title I Director, noted,

This could be a continual professional development model, because we have had training for as long as I can remember on balanced literacy. But, it is like beating your head against the wall—those who get it implement it marvelously. This who don't get it may call it guided reading, but it is not meeting children where they are as it was intended.

The Instructional Coaches in Lots of Land were provided the opportunity to attend a national training on how to better do their job. One Coach commented, "Not only does this affirm that our jobs are important, but we can bring back timely and relevant information from specialists from across the nation."

The issue of significant staff turn-over at both middle and high school levels in both districts was noted.

We see teachers come and teachers go. Our growth in student population means more teachers, and we need to train them to get them up to speed. While we use Professional Learning Team grade-level meetings within work hours, we do require staff to remain after-school for intervention development and planning. This is NOT the time we can glean creativity and ingenuity from our own.

Ms. College, high school counselor at Increasing High, expressed her opinion about the \$5,000.00 allocated to each high school for professional development.

I understand that intervention focus is on the early grades, but we have a large number of students with significant needs whose issues are difficult to address. The funding allocated to our school, even if divided up per staff member, could not support effective PD. We need both in-house training to change staff perspectives and specific instructional strategy training to focus on how to reach diverse learners. Increasing High School is not in Kansas anymore, and we need to bridge some gaps if we want to bring about academic growth in our student body.

Mrs. Consistency, Principal at Valley Elementary School, explained the in-house process of professional development they provided for staff during regular faculty meetings. She and the assistant principal decided that faculty meetings should become professional development sessions, since e-mail could be used to effectively to simply communicate information on a daily basis.

About three years ago we opted to use faculty meetings as professional development opportunities. We did bring refreshments but tried to communicate a new level of expectation regarding how we teach here at Growing. Educational and instructional decisions were to be data-driven. No excuses accepted. If a student was not at grade level, the perception administratively was that the deficit was a function of instruction—it was not a student-owned issue.

In addition, the administration at Valley reached out directly to the NCDPI RtI Consultants to come to their school to provide RtI implementation training. They thought the professional development would support their philosophy, and that hearing it from someone from NCDPI outside the system would solidify their process. The question and answer session which followed provided a level of quality interaction between trainer and teaching staff focused on data-driven decision-making. Principal Consistency said,

Connecting with the consultant at DPI was the best thing we could have done. She was helpful and communicated well with our staff regarding sending the message, ‘this is not just one more thing to do.’ We do a lot of figuring stuff out on our own around here, so RtI just became another one of those things.

In addition, Mrs. Buy-in, Curriculum Facilitator, noted with a smile and a laugh,

Sometimes in the county schools, you just need to hear the message from someone else in order to believe it. We are sending the message from the inside AND in the near future from the outside AGAIN! Often we forget that staff as learners need to hear the lesson multiple times in varied ways...just like our students! These one-shot trainings just don’t work. Our teachers require interventions themselves! We laugh about that sometimes: ‘Teacher Cindy needs an intervention.’ Then we strategize about who will do what when to help move her along the acceptance continuum.

Valley Elementary also utilized in-house professional development facilitated by the Curriculum Facilitator, Mrs. Buy-in. The facilitator commented,

Fortunately, the staff accepts training from me, which makes it a nice role. I can identify needs and subsequently provide professional development during grade-level meetings almost immediately. The timeliness of training can be essential to meeting needs. There just isn’t enough time to get it all done and to plan effectively.

Poverty and Diversity

Finally, the issue of students coming from diverse or impoverished backgrounds was identified as a barrier across settings to effective RtI implementation. Most of the interviewees worked in schools with higher than average Free and Reduced Lunch percentages, a measure of economic disadvantage in schools. There seemed to be a resounding issue related to reaching higher student standards required from the Common

Core Curriculum when skill gaps and below grade-level performance could be identified among the majority of students on a campus.

Mrs. Green, Title I Director in District Lots of Land, responded to a question about how poverty affected the implementation of RtI by saying, “The poverty rates impacts our need in the district greatly because of the needed resources that many of our students have in the home.” Similarly, the Instructional Coach at Valley Elementary indicated, “We have limited resources to meet an ever-changing student population. We continue to grow annually as a district, and the increased diversity we have seen is in English as a Second Language learners.”

Ms. Support, school counselor at Expanding Middle School commented about the developmental differences in meeting the needs of students who live in poverty at the middle school level. Drawing comparisons to her elementary school experience, “Our students live in the same poor households that their elementary siblings do. But, they want peer acceptance, want to fit in and not to be singled out, and even if they want help, resist it.” She added that variables outside the school building often impact the students to a greater degree than what happens within the building. “If a student has stuff happening, their heart and mind are not on learning.”

Ms. Transition, the high school counselor at Single High School in District Small Places, expanded on the concepts impacting student learning that do not relate to curriculum, instruction, and intervention.

These students have a lot more than academic skills deficits to deal with. Many of their parents have not completed school and due to economic issues in our county, many are out of work. Parental support for our struggling students is not one of our strengths.

Mrs. Discipline, the assistant principal at Single High reinforced this idea.

They still are kids, not mature adults. They are under immense pressure all the time to achieve, to stay out of trouble, to help earn income to support the family. Our students deal with a lot of pressure as a result of economics in this county. It is difficult to tease apart the social and emotional aspects of learning—motivation—from actual learning deficits when there is worry and concern over the basics like food and clothing.

The academic gaps found in diverse and economically disadvantaged learners are a focus of the federal legislation of which RtI is a part. It appears that there are multiple layers of implementation barriers that seem to increase as students progress through school.

Parent Connections

The working relationship with families was only mentioned in District Small Spaces, but it was discussed across the system at various school levels. Principal Beach from Winter Primary spoke about involving parents in school and in the RtI process more than any other school staff member interviewed. His philosophy of a school culture that revolves around trust: from leadership to teacher to student and to family and back was indicated when he said, “We have got to work together to make a change. If we don’t, we won’t get anywhere.” He added that parents had to be in support of the provision of more intensive academic interventions during pull-out sessions. “We need parent support

to do what we need to do with student learning. That is an area we need to improve on. Our parents are hardworking folks, so we need to get creative about in the schoolhouse door.” Principal Beach continued,

We need parent support. We can’t do this without them understanding what an intervention is. One mother thought we were trying to do an intervention like she had seen on TV, like for a drug issue. She was MAD. I got her calmed down and explained that the intervention was focused on reading and how it would work, and she was ALL for it. I may need to do more school communicating . . .

From a district administrator perspective, Mrs. Davis saw the need for parent connections but in a different way than did Principal Beach. Mrs. Davis saw the level of parental involvement in the RtI process at developing stages across the district but feared that teachers who are confused by the RtI process prompt parents to request for psycho-educational evaluations.

Parents tend to try to circumvent the intervention process by asking for psycho-educational evaluations for their child. Parents have difficulty coming to school to meet with teachers due to transportation barriers, and, therefore, do not always understand that their child’s educational needs may already be identified and being met through instructionally-driven interventions.

Finally, staff from Single High School and Stable Middle School supported the need for involving parents in the RtI process and noted that it was an area that was a part of the school growth plan. Principal Newguy at Stable Middle School, as a new employee to the county, noted, “Taking care of family is a key element in this

community. I think it stems from the historical farming philosophy and the current depleting economics. We need to embrace this concept more than we do.”

Summary Thoughts

There are key elements that relate to implementation of a legislative mandate such as RtI across the two rural districts visited. According to relevant staff members interviewed, there were commonalities between District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces, despite their geographical and population differences. Personnel from both rural districts mentioned state RtI implementation challenges that involved a kind of *perfect storm* of multiple simultaneous and progressive transitions coming out of North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI).

North Carolina’s initial roll-out of RtI took significant twists and turns to which implementing districts had to adjust. While pilot sites were solidifying processes and reporting back to the Exceptional Education department at NCDPI regarding functionality of those processes beginning in 2004–2005, NCDPI opted to change the name the framework from the commonly accepted Response to Intervention to an unfamiliar Responsiveness to Instruction in 2007. The change in name did not indicate any alteration in procedure other than a focus on instruction as intervention. However, confusion occurred. Then, in 2009, the facilitation of state RtI moved from the Exceptional Education department at NCDPI to the regular education department, which meant that districts reorganized their district facilitation accordingly. Finally in 2011, NCDPI changed the framework from a four-tier to a three-tier intervention-based model.

The multiple changes and modifications of the initial state RtI roll-out caused frustration and confusion among these two rural districts.

Additionally, there were limited written guidelines presented from NCDPI for school districts to follow unless they were one of the five pilot sites. Even then, the paperwork to support the theoretical process was often delayed by more than six months from the announcement of change, such that many districts had already provided redirection training, and in some cases, had already created their own.

The final element to the creation of the perfect storm in the state RtI implementation involved the adherence to the Common Core Curriculum by North Carolina. The academic standards expected under this new curriculum created teaching gaps from the previous Standard Course of Study. The focus of teacher professional development turned away from facilitation of the RtI framework towards acquiring understanding and skill development about what teaching the new Common Core involved. There was a need to ensure that students were not meeting standards due to their own skill deficits as opposed to not having been taught skills.

Additional elements were cited by staff within District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces that they identified to interfere with stellar implementation of state RtI. These factors are inter-related, since they all related to limited personnel and limited funding. The need for intensive an on-going professional development to continue to support the reform was mentioned. Because of the structural complexity of managing student outcome data and simultaneously creating student-centered intervention groups

every six to nine weeks, staff members devoted a portion of their time to this task and supporting others in understanding how to do it.

The issues of poverty and diversity within the student population of District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces were mentioned as challenges that required additional attention and resources. Finally, the need for increased parent involvement and understanding was mentioned only by District Small Spaces. The philosophy in this small district supported the idea that schools cannot make these changes alone.

I was impressed by the attention to detail staff in both districts discussed in their implementation processes. I was also impressed by the fact that they did not complain about the barriers they identified, they simply mentioned them pragmatically as issues. However, the interview process seemed to allow individuals to reflect upon the state RtI implementation status in their respective district, particularly since they were identified to be stellar.

In Chapter V, I will address the identified issues surrounding effective state RtI implementation in these two rural districts. I will also assimilate the information so that the research questions can be answered.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

The federal laws that provided the foundation for the Response to Instruction and subsequently transfer the responsibility for oversight to the states often fail to consider the context of implementation. The implementation of the RtI system in school districts is a complex and challenging process. Developing and sustaining a comprehensive, preventive, supportive, and corrective system requires an extensive investment of energy, time, and resources at the district level. In rural school districts where staffing and resources are limited, the exploration of effective implementation processes may assist other districts in their implementation.

Rural schools, in particular, face great challenges in implementing large scale educational mandates that involve systemic changes. Leadership is crucial to the development of Response to Instruction implementation. Rural schools need adaptable leadership and defined procedures that are often very different than those found in metropolitan areas (Theobald, 2005).

The previous chapter identified relevant variables related to state RtI implementation derived from interviews with district personnel from two rural, yet very different North Carolina school districts that were identified to have stellar

implementation processes. This chapter will synthesize those variables and respond to the research questions posed at the onset of the research.

The relevant variables related to RtI implementation that were identified in this research include:

- The state roll-out of RtI in North Carolina occurred with frequent changes and revisions over a period of nine years.
- The paperwork process and guidance documents from NCDPI were not coordinated with the communications of revisions.
- The Core Curriculum was introduced through NCDPI about seven years after the initial RtI roll-out, which resulted in a changed content and process to instruction.
- The implementation of RtI requires a complex structural organization and scheduling of student interventions.
- Professional development was identified to be a crucial need for RtI implementation.
- Poverty and diversity were identified issues that created increased barriers to effective RtI implementation.
- The need for parent connections was noted as a priority for the smaller district.

The State RtI Roll-Out in North Carolina

The state roll-out of RtI in North Carolina occurred with frequent changes and revisions over a period of nine years. From the identification of five pilot districts across the state in 2004-2005 to the most recent revision from a four-tier to a three-tier model in late 2011 (see Figure 1 in Chapter I), the implementation of state RtI has not been a thoroughly straight-forward process. The participants interviewed mentioned the impact of the inconsistency that the state's process created for them, whether the respondents worked at the district or school-based level. The redirection and repositioning of the state

RtI coordination from the Exceptional Education to the regular education department caused resulting repositioning of the responsibility in both districts which created confusion and a restart of sorts.

In the larger district, Lots of Land, where there were specialized personnel and a leadership team with perspective on RtI, the designation of the Title I Director as RtI coordinator seems to have been an effective decision. The instructional and particularly the literacy skills she possessed provided a leader who also had the organizational power to orchestrate professional development and acceptance or buy-in from staff across the district. Although school staff may not have known Mrs. Green's name, there was an understanding, particularly in the elementary and middle school, of what the district expectations were regarding RtI.

In contrast, in the smaller district, Small Spaces, the Student Services Coordinator was delegated the RtI responsibility once it transitioned from the Exceptional Education Director. Leaders in District Small Spaces appear to have a wider range of area responsibilities, and so the move to the Student Services department may have been more of a reactionary decision to adding/changing roles. It appeared that Mrs. Davis may not have had the authority or the knowledge to facilitate the kind of direction that RtI implementation may need to be effective. Nonetheless, she made an effort to acquire skills and to support schools individually in their development. "She is a great support and always comes to problem solve with us," noted Principal Beach from Winter Primary.

Designation of the responsibility for a school reform initiative should be carefully considered not only by state but by district leadership. The initial alignment of state RtI with Exceptional Education supported a perception that the initiative was merely a prerequisite for Exceptional Education eligibility. The state did recognize its error and realigned the initiative, but the resulting outcome created confusion in implementation across the state. The pilot sites received more direct communication regarding the changes from NCDPI and were able to respond more efficiently to them.

Central Office Leadership of RtI

I made a pictorial representation of the process of RtI implementation for both District Lots of Land (Figure 7 in Chapter IV) and District Small Spaces (Figure 8 in Chapter IV). By following the arrows, the pathway of implementation can be traced in both figures. There is a more distinct direction in District Lots of Land, more than likely due to the district's involvement as one of NCDPI's pilot state RtI sites that led to then receiving clearer directions from NCDPI. Additionally, the current position of the RtI coordinator appears to possess more organizational authority.

The double-headed arrows in the District Small Spaces's figure of RtI implementation (Figure 8 in Chapter IV) demonstrate the lack of clear central office direction given to schools. There appears to be a more collaborative, reciprocal effort to work towards improved implementation between specific schools visited and the central office coordinator. The RtI coordinator does not possess curricular expertise and is not in a direct line of communication with the previous coordinator, the Exceptional Education

Director, based on the district organizational chart. Additionally, District Small Spaces was not involved as a state pilot site so that clear expectations for implementation may not have been understood by the previous RtI coordinator.

Paperwork and Guidance Documents

Similarly, the state RtI paperwork and guidance documents were not provided to districts at the time of transition. Mrs. Green, Title I Director for District Lots of Land, noted about their district's implementation/transition training from four tiers to three tiers, "We rolled this out—so classic, and after we did our training, and rolled out the revised understanding, then the paperwork was released by NCDPI on RtI." Pilot sites did have a significant level of training and assistance in establishing their teams and processes, as reported by Mrs. Woods from Growing Elementary School in District Lots of Land. "I was assistant principal then, but NCDPI provided a great deal of staff training both at our school site and at common training sites for all pilots. It was a nice support—I wish they had done the same with all these changes."

I was a part of a district where we were expected to develop our own paperwork, process and procedure manual, and updated PEP. It was a lengthy, cumbersome process delegated to three individuals. The task took about a month, and, as soon as it was released, required ongoing updates. If I had been privy to any NCDPI RtI trainings, it would have been a much easier task. However, except for the pilot sites, and professional development provided for Exceptional Education staff through the NCDPI EC trainers,

there was none made available to regular education staff. This same circumstance complicated implementation in the districts in this study.

The Core Curriculum Roll-Out

The timing of North Carolina's acceptance/adoption of the Common Core Curriculum interfered with the on-going RtI process. Because of limited time and finances, professional development became focused on Common Core Curriculum and standards. It was appropriate to assess if instructionally sound procedures and content were being taught, since there were identified gaps between the previous Standard Course of Study and the new curriculum. However, again the process of implementation of instructional intervention strategies became blurred by a change of curriculum standards in the classroom. It was difficult to sift through what was a skill deficit (student) and what was a deficit that existed because it had not been taught. Students became caught in the cross-fire of the transition with less attention being paid to the fidelity of interventions and more being paid to sound instruction.

In my district school counselors remained the coordinators of Student Support Teams. This seemed to be a mismatch as their knowledge of curriculum had become outdated, since they were not privy to the Core Curriculum trainings. Their effectiveness in this role decreased significantly, as they relied on other curriculum specialists to assist in identifying instructional versus student-based gaps in learning. My district was, like Small Spaces District, functioning in a combination of process from the past (where

Student Support coordinated teams) and a focus on academic skills (with a new process and a new curriculum), so the process was not clearly articulated nor adopted.

RtI Requires Complex Structural Organization

Both District Small Spaces and District Lots of Land identified the need for strategic coordination of the identification of students in need of intervention and the orchestration of a working schedule to implement those interventions. In most cases, the Curriculum Facilitator filled that role, based on being empowered by the administration to provide supports to struggling students. Often, the school identified a team (such as Principal/Assistant Principal/Counselor and Curriculum Facilitator) to fulfill the role of assessing outcome data and subsequently organizing a six or nine week plan of intervention. Not only do these individuals require knowledge surrounding the curriculum, the assessments, progress monitoring, but also the parameters of organizing a complicated schedule. In both districts, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels, the interviewees were experts in making this work effectively and were allowed the time to perform the task. Mrs. Intervene, Curriculum Facilitator at Stable Middle School, summed up this process, particularly focusing on the cost and practicality issues rural schools face when trying to provide intervention before or after school. She indicated,

We try to carefully consider and evaluate how the new Common Core curriculum is being delivered to students. We first work with teachers to increase the efficacy of their teaching, and then look to identify students not responding to the traditional delivery of the curriculum for additional intervention. We only have these children for a limited window of time each day. After school programming

is cost-prohibitive due to the transportation cost. The students who need this the most aren't in a position to have family come pick them up and often live quite a distance away.

The delivery of quality instruction and student-focused research-based interventions are monumental tasks, particularly when a new set of standards and the assessments that accompany them will assess teacher performance. This kind of pressure can facilitate improvement in schools, but it is difficult to find a balance for the increased chaos that the implementation of changes has rendered.

Professional Development

A theme that was communicated throughout all of the interviews was the need for on-going professional development. When the Common Core Curriculum became an expectation in North Carolina, the majority of teacher training centered on this over the past year or two. With limited teacher time availability and an even more limited professional development budget, particularly in rural areas, it became difficult to balance the need with the delivery of service. While teachers needed training on how to teach to a high standard for all students, they also needed to understand how to progress monitor, what assessment scores mean, and how to implement individualized or small group interventions with fidelity. Therefore, every minute of unallocated time possible was designed to work on professional development. These times included common planning time, Professional Learning Communities, and after-school hours. Professional development has changed from the workshop opportunities of the past to working collaboratively with other school teachers, curriculum specialists, and administrators in

learning how to teach more effectively using windows of opportunity carved within the school day.

While the focus on academic achievement is appropriate in schools, my background as a school psychologist interferes with total acceptance of this philosophy. I still believe that we teach curriculum to students, and students are children. It appears that we sometimes miss the obvious about a student in relation to their learning such as social-emotional issues and developmental issues. The ability to connect with students and help them solve social issues is a relevant part of skills that should be taught in schools. However, because of the focus on academics, school counselors are now being used as classroom teachers to provide additional opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively. My support for the social emotional growth of students remains steadfast.

Poverty and Diversity

Personnel in both District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces expressed concerns over the poverty and diversity of their student populations. The poverty issues centered around two categories: (a) living in an environment that does not support education (lack of materials, particularly in reading and (b) living with stressors such as worry about food and clothing, having electricity, earning money, both which can impede academic success. The demographic data in District Small Spaces seemed to demonstrate a more concentrated issue with economic distress based on county loss of industry and employment. Both Districts recognize the barriers that Second Language

Learners have in acquiring reading and writing skills. District Lots of Land is increasing in Hispanic students, while District Small Spaces has a significant American Indian population. This group of students is often more at-risk for not graduating from school, so staff in both counties expressed a goal to focus on early intervention.

Principal Newguy from District Small Spaces mentioned alliances with community service programs to meet the needs of disenfranchised students in order to better engage them and to support academic growth in rural students. “Communities in Schools tutoring and Gear Up are services provided by external agencies. We give specialized invitations to more disadvantaged students to ensure equitable opportunity.” When funding and, in particular, transportation costs impact additional services for the students in most need, rural schools benefit from community partnerships.

The Need for Family Connections

The one area that was addressed across the county in District Small Spaces but not mentioned in District Lots of Land was the need to establish a working relationship with parents. This might be due to the smaller size of the county, and, as more visible residents in the district, the school staff could benefit from social networking among families to support education.

Mr. Newguy asserted that “Schools must meet students and families where they are and elicit their understanding in what we are trying to do.” We need to develop “connections with parents by relationship-building and communicating where students are academically in understandable terms.” Assistant Principal Discipline and Counselor

Transition from Single High school expressed concern that parental involvement needed to be a higher priority so that parents can understand school expectations.

Because people in rural communities know one another and are often culturally bound together by the care and concern for each other and their children, it can lead to a distrust of newcomers or new processes to the school environment. School leaders and staff need to elicit community input from parents and students, when possible as they are working towards transformation of their school. This buy-in can provide energy for staff and community as well as a better understanding and ultimate support for improved academic achievement.

Mrs. Davis, District Small Spaces state RtI coordinator, made a comment that suggested an understanding of how her community functions. “It takes a long time to make changes in Small Spaces County. We just work very slowly, because I think we are cautious about change.”

Research Questions

My interactions in District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces yielded the following responses to the research questions posed by this study.

Research Question 1

How has the school district leadership led the implementation of RtI? Both districts in this research were identified by the state to be stellar in their efforts of implementation of state RtI. Mirroring the evolution of facilitation of RtI implementation of North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), however, the districts have

only recently transitioned the leadership of RtI from the Exceptional Education Department to regular education. The effectiveness of that leadership appeared to be reflective of the political leverage available to the leader based on the role in the district. The administrator in District Lots of Land also directs all Title I funding, so the provision of funding to support academic efforts in schools motivated participation in the professional development. In addition, District Lots of Land leadership supported the modification of the state required Personal Education Plan (PEP) that was collaboratively developed within the district by the RtI coordinator and the curriculum directors.

The administrator for state RtI in District Small Spaces coordinates student support areas (counseling, social work, homeless education), has no funding to support implementation efforts, is not a curriculum expert, and does not work closely with the curriculum team in the district. The upper administration appeared not to empower this individual to effectively lead state RtI implementation. This administrator used interpersonal relationship building on a more individual school-level to support implementation.

Although different strategies were used in District Lots of Land as compared to District Small Spaces to lead the implementation of state RtI, the approaches used appeared to have outcomes that were equally effective. School personnel understood the pragmatics and expectations of the RtI framework and were assertively making it a part of their school business. Rural educational issues, in general, cannot be addressed with a

cookie-cutter approach to school improvement, as the differences between the two rural North Carolina districts studied in this project demonstrate.

Research Question 2

What are the pragmatics specific to RtI implementation in rural school districts?

Rural districts such as District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces have confronted issues and barriers that are exclusively related to being rural. Rural schools are challenging due to limited resources, growing student diversity, community poverty, and struggling students. Demographically, rural residents, like those in District Small Spaces, are often politically conservative regarding acceptance of change. The residents may be somewhat socially secluded, which provides an explanation for why parent involvement in the District Small Spaces was identified to be a relevant variable to successful state RtI implementation. So, change in rural districts can become particularly challenging to implement, particularly when the state directives have been vague and evolving themselves, as in North Carolina.

There are three specific challenges that impact the district leadership of policy implementation such as RtI in rural schools. The impact of student poverty and economic loss in some rural districts such as North Carolina (where significant numbers of manufacturing jobs have been lost), as in District Small Spaces, affects the student demographics and parent/community support of a school. This creates a challenge for not only district but also building leadership. Also, staffing limitations inhibit division of responsibilities among leadership, impacting the effectiveness of policy implementation

and staff development opportunities, as well as the recruitment and retention of quality teachers. All of these were noted to be issues in this research project related to RtI implementation.

Other rural districts in North Carolina, like District Lots of Land, are growing in student population and student diversity. The recruitment and particularly retention of quality staff is a barrier that impacts the implementation of reform efforts, like state RtI.

Research Question 3

How do school-based personnel interpret the guidance from district-level regarding RtI implementation? School-based personnel from both District Lots of Land and District Small Spaces expressed more concern related to the guidance from the state of North Carolina than that from the district leadership. One school counselor who had been very involved with implementation of RtI at both the elementary level and more recently at the middle school level indicated, “I just wish the state would figure it out what they want it to look like.” Staff in District Lots of Land, particularly the curriculum facilitators, demonstrated a thorough understanding and appeared to be given the support (monthly district level meetings and national professional development opportunities) and the professional leverage from their principals to provide a framework of expectations.

District-wide professional development focused on Response to Intervention (RtI) implementation was reported to have only provided by District Lots of Land’s leadership, but this was not specifically noted by any school-level personnel. Both district leadership

teams were involved with selecting core curriculum as well as with guiding some intervention-based program selections. It appeared that the guidance in District Lots of Land was facilitated through recommendations from principal meetings and monthly curriculum facilitator meetings.

Both settings opted to guide staff to use the NCDPI three-tier RtI paperwork process, although District Lots of Land recognized the relevance of incorporating a more user-friendly Personal Education Plan (PEP) and developed a county-based version. The locally designed PEP provided a clear connection to student data and movement to the RtI process as a result of documented teacher-driven interventions which failed to render progress. Similarly, Valley Elementary school in District Small Spaces modeled the use of a common colored folder (purple) to designate a student in the RtI process which was then adopted across the district.

Because guidance about RtI implementation in District Small Spaces was historically and currently not clear, one school, Valley Elementary, coordinated school-based RtI training from the NCDPI RtI consultants. This helped to support efforts already underway, reinforcing the school-level interpretation. Other schools, then, modeled their implementation from the leader school, Valley Elementary.

Research Question 4

What specific strategies/interventions are developed to meet the unique needs of the rural student? Rural student needs are often complex due to the issues impacting non-urban areas. School personnel recognize that they must intervene with students

during school hours. Transportation costs inhibit having before or after-school intervention programs, and rural parents are often not in a position financially to be available or able to pick up their student. Therefore, extensive attention is given to developing effective and efficient schedules to provide specific interventions to struggling students, since within-school hours are the only hours available.

Rural schools are likely to partner with community agencies to support student learning. Programs like Gear Up and Communities in Schools, though available in urban areas, may provide different kinds of services to meet rural student needs. Gear Up works with the families of potential first-generation potential college students in rural areas more than urban areas due to a higher degree of hesitancy about their children attending college. Communities in Schools staff or volunteers are more likely to tutor students in rural areas.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

Legislative changes at the federal and state levels regarding the use of Response to Intervention (RtI) have demonstrated significant impacts on the complex process of teaching and learning. Differentiated instruction, small group intervention, and the use of data to demonstrate student progress are being used routinely to assist in making educational decisions. Effective implementation requires clear understanding at all levels of school personnel, collaboration, high quality professional development, and a commitment to make a change that can be sustained. The educational culture must be one of a shared vision, involving collaboration among all stakeholders. The conversation

during interviews in this study demonstrated key components of RtI: “data-driven decisions,” “re-aligning to ensure fidelity,” “teacher together time,” and “the more you can learn about a student, the more you can customize to meet their needs.” Response to Intervention is an educational cultural change in these districts and appears to be one that will stay.

The manner in which implementation of federal mandates, such as RtI, occurs in rural schools, may be related to the kind of rural community. North Carolina consists of two types of rural communities: (a) those that are growing rapidly but also increasing in the diversity of the students they are serving, and (b) those that are decreasing in population due to loss of business and industry. This research focused on two rural school districts, one that fit into each of these categories. Sweeping generalizations cannot be made regarding the implementation of mandates due to the variance in contextual variables that impacted how things work in each setting. However, in this project, the larger district used a top-down method to implement the reform, while the smaller district worked from within--building interpersonal relationships to support individual effort within school buildings.

Educational strategies remain the same with students—whether rural or urban, particularly because of the implementation of the Common Core Curriculum across the nation. Rural schools may rely on external alliances with agencies to support student learning due to a lower proportion of funding available to use. Future research might

focus on how rural schools organize their allotted resources to meet the needs of their struggling students.

Summary and Conclusions

The study of the implementation of federal legislation in educational settings is relevant since the expected outcomes of these provisions are driving how schools conduct their business. RtI (Response to Intervention/Instruction) is an educational framework designed to provide early intervention to struggling students. In theory, it is a logical process to support students not functioning at grade-level. Give students what they need, when they need it, and without resorting to identifying them as possessing a disability. Practically, however, the framework requires systemic and perspective changes at all levels as a part of the implementation process.

This study assessed the perspectives of district and school leadership regarding the process of Rti implementation in two rural but very different districts. These rural districts were identified by NCDPI to have stellar implementation processes. This study demonstrated that different approaches to implementation can result in equal outcomes. While the larger rural district used a top-down training of school-level teams to re-introduce an altered framework to RtI processes that were already in place, the smaller district worked with model schools to adjust their practices to the updated direction given by NCDPI. The model schools then partnered with other schools to replicate the altered practices. The barriers that exist in rural schools such as poverty, diversity, difficulty with attraction of and retention of quality staff creates an opportunity for leaders to use

creative forms of best practice in implementation. Both districts involved did just that. While leadership did not provide a guidebook on “how to implement,” they supported the unique efforts that each school leader performed in order to facilitate the roll-out. Inadequate funding to support intervention efforts (programming or personnel) was identified to be an issue in each district. The impact of multiple changes in the RtI framework filtering down to schools over nearly a ten year period caused frustration among school staff.

The larger district that had piloted the process under the direction of NCDPI and whose school leaders were further along in refining their process, expressed a higher degree of frustration with the changes, although the process and understanding demonstrated by the staff interviewed indicated ultimate acceptance. In both districts, RtI implementation facilitated teachers to scrutinize what and how they were teaching information to students by monitoring student skill progress using data outcome on an on-going basis. Individual or small group assistance was provided in a timely manner to address skill deficits. RtI also reinforced the need for teachers to partner with their fellow teachers to develop strategies for intervening when students were not acquiring needed skills. Instructional practices were organized to be more consistent across school settings in a way that benefitted students. School leaders were able to identify effective teaching by meeting regularly to review student data with the teachers.

While the process of intervening with students when they are falling below standard seems like an appropriate outcome to RtI implementation, one more relevant on-

going practice that has developed is that teachers are diving deep into curriculum to determine how it should be best taught. Also, administrators are creating organizational academic support structures within school sites rather than as “add-ons.” Unintended outcomes can sometimes be a really good thing.

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APPENDIX A

RTI ESSENTIAL COMPONENT INTEGRITY WORKSHEET

RTI Essential Components Integrity Worksheet

School: _____	District: _____	Date: _____
Grades of Student Population: K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12		
Persons Interviewed: _____		
Interviewer: _____		

Focus Area:	<input type="checkbox"/> Reading/Language Arts	Grades: _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics	Grades: _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> Behavior	Grades: _____

The RTI Essential Components Integrity Rubric and the RTI Essential Components Integrity Worksheet are for use by individuals responsible for monitoring the school-level fidelity of Response to Intervention (RTI) implementation. They may also be used by schools for self-appraisal; however, they were not designed for compliance monitoring and therefore should not be used for this purpose.

The rubric and the worksheet are designed to be used together and are aligned with the *Essential Components of RTI: A Closer Look at Response to Intervention* (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

Instructions—The purpose of this worksheet is to provide a framework for collecting relevant information and for recording a school's rating on various items related to RTI implementation. Descriptions of ratings for each item are provided on the RTI Essential Components Integrity Rubric.

Information about school-level implementation should be collected through interviews with school personnel (sample interview questions are provided below) and through observations and document review. After all of the information has been collected, use your notes and the RTI Essential Components Integrity Rubric to rate the school on each item. The Rubric provides a five-point rating scale and descriptions of practices that would score a 1, 3, and 5. If you judge a school's practice to fall between the described ratings, assign the school a rating of 2 or 4. For example, if you judge a school to be performing at a level higher than the Rubric describes for a 3 rating but not quite at the level described for a 5, rate the school as performing at a 4.



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
<i>Screening—The RTI system accurately identifies students at risk of poor learning outcomes or challenging behaviors.</i>			
1. Screening Tools	<p>What tools do you use for universal screening?</p> <p>When your school selected the screening tool(s), how much attention was paid to the evidence from the vendor regarding the validity, reliability, and accuracy of the tool?</p> <p>Does your school have documentation from the vendor that these tools have been shown to be valid, reliable, and accurate (including with sub-groups)?</p> <p>Do you have reason to believe that the screening tool(s) that you use may have issues with validity, reliability, or accuracy (including with sub-groups)? If so, please explain.</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
2. Universal Screening	<p>Are all students at the target grade levels screened at the beginning of the school year?</p> <p>Does your school conduct screening throughout the school year? If so, how many times during the school year are students in the target grade levels typically screened?</p> <p>Is a well-defined cut score used to identify students at risk?</p> <p>Do you conduct a follow-up assessment to ensure that the results of the initial screening were accurate before placing a student in secondary prevention? If so, please describe.</p> <p>Describe the process for conducting the screenings.</p> <p>To what extent is this process consistently followed?</p> <p>How closely does the administration of the screening follow the developer guidelines?</p> <p>Are there differences in the process for different students? If yes, describe these differences.</p> <p>Is there anything about the process that you feel would jeopardize the accuracy of the results? If so, please describe.</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
<i>Multi-Level Prevention/Intervention System—The framework includes a school-wide, multi-level system for preventing school failure.</i>			
Primary Level Prevention/Core Curriculum			
3. Research-Based Curriculum Materials	<p>When your school selected its core instructional materials, how much attention was paid to the evidence from the vendor regarding effectiveness of the materials when used with fidelity?</p> <p>Does your school have a practice of maintaining documentation from the vendor about the evidence of the effectiveness of the materials when used with fidelity?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
4. Fidelity	<p>Is the core curriculum delivered with fidelity? If so, what evidence indicates this?</p> <p>Are procedures in place to monitor the fidelity of delivery of the core curriculum?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
5. Articulation of Teaching and Learning (in and across grade levels)	<p>What efforts have been made to articulate teaching and learning from one grade to another?</p> <p>Describe the process that supports the articulation of teaching and learning from one grade to another.</p> <p>What efforts have been made to articulate teaching and learning within grade levels or subject areas?</p> <p>Describe the process that supports the articulation of teaching and learning from one teacher to another within the same grade.</p> <p>How consistent is the learning experience among students in the same grade and subject with different teachers?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
6. Instruction	<p>To what extent do teachers use student assessment data and knowledge of student readiness, language, and culture to offer different teaching and learning strategies that address individual needs?</p> <p>How consistent is this effort among the teaching staff?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
7. School-Based Professional Development	<p>Do the teachers regularly participate in school-based professional development that is structured so that teachers continuously examine, reflect upon, and improve instructional practice?</p> <p>If so, please describe this professional development.</p> <p>How frequently is professional development provided?</p> <p>What percentage of the teaching staff participates?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
Secondary Level Prevention			
8. Evidence-Based Intervention	<p>What program(s) does your school use for secondary intervention?</p> <p>Have these programs demonstrated efficacy with the target populations (e.g., has research shown that the interventions positively impact student achievement)?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
9. Complements Core Instruction	<p>How do the instructors of the secondary level intervention ensure that the content that they address is well aligned and complements the core instruction for each student?</p> <p>How are foundational skills that support core instruction incorporated into secondary level intervention?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
10. Fidelity	<p>Are procedures in place to monitor the fidelity of implementation of the secondary level interventions? If so, please describe.</p> <p>Does the evidence indicate that the intervention is implemented with fidelity?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
11. Instruction	<p>Are the secondary level interventions always led by staff adequately trained to implement the interventions with fidelity? If not, who provides the secondary level intervention and what is their background?</p> <p>Are the secondary interventions always conducted with small groups of students?</p> <p>What is the maximum small group size?</p> <p>Describe a typical secondary level experience for students.</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
12. Determining Responsiveness to Secondary Level Prevention	<p>Are the decisions about whether or not a student is responding to secondary level interventions based on progress monitoring data?</p> <p>Are the decisions made based on the slope of a student's progress or on the student's final status at the end of secondary level prevention?</p> <p>Are the criteria implemented accurately and consistently?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
13. Addition to Primary	<p>Are the secondary level interventions always implemented as a supplement to the core curriculum?</p> <p>If no, please explain.</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
Tertiary Level Prevention			
14. Evidence-Based Intervention	<p>What evidence-based instructional practices are implemented at the tertiary level?</p> <p>How were the interventions used at the tertiary level developed?</p> <p>Are the tertiary level interventions more intense than the secondary level intervention? If so, how are they more intense?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
15. Fidelity	<p>Are procedures in place to monitor the fidelity of implementation of the tertiary level interventions?</p> <p>How do you ensure that the individualized instruction at the tertiary level includes evidence-based instructional practices?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
16. Instruction	<p>Are the tertiary level interventions always led by staff adequately trained to implement the interventions as designed? If not, who provides the tertiary level intervention and what is their background?</p> <p>Does the group size allow for the interventionist to adjust and individualize instruction to address the needs of each student?</p> <p>What is the maximum small group size?</p> <p>Describe a typical tertiary level experience for students.</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
17. Determining Responsiveness to Tertiary Level Prevention	<p>Are the decisions about whether or not a student is responding to tertiary level interventions based on progress monitoring data?</p> <p>Are the decisions made based on the slope of a student's progress, or on the student's final status at the end of tertiary level prevention?</p> <p>Are the criteria implemented accurately and consistently?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
18. Relationship to Primary	<p>Are the tertiary level interventions always implemented as a supplement to the core curriculum or do tertiary level interventions replace the core curriculum for some students?</p> <p>How do you decide if a student receiving tertiary instruction should remain in primary prevention?</p> <p>How do you ensure meaningful connections exist between tertiary intervention and the core curriculum?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
<i>Progress Monitoring—Ongoing and frequent monitoring of progress quantifies rates of improvement and, informs instructional practice and the development of individualized programs.</i>			
19. Progress Monitoring Tools	<p>What tools are used for progress monitoring? How many alternate forms of equal difficulty are available?</p> <p>When your school selected the progress monitoring tool(s), how much attention was paid to the evidence from the vendor regarding the validity, reliability, and accuracy of the tool(s)?</p> <p>Does your school have documentation from the vendor that these tools have been shown to be valid, reliable, and accurate (including with sub-groups)?</p> <p>Do you have reason to believe that the progress monitoring tool(s) used may have issues with validity, reliability, or accuracy (including with sub-groups)? If so, please explain.</p> <p>Has the tool been validated for use with student populations similar to yours?</p> <p>Does the scoring manual or other information provided by the vendor provide benchmarks for acceptable growth?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
20. Monitoring Progress	<p>How often is the progress of students at the secondary level monitored?</p> <p>How often is the progress of students at the tertiary level monitored?</p> <p>Is progress monitoring conducted frequently enough to show a trend in academic (or behavioral) development over time?</p> <p>Describe the process used for monitoring progress.</p> <p>Are the progress monitoring measures administered according to developer guidelines?</p> <p>To what extent is this process consistently followed?</p> <p>Are there differences in the process for different students? If yes, describe these differences.</p> <p>Is there anything about the process that would jeopardize the accuracy of the results? If so, please describe.</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
Data-Based Decision Making —Data-based decision making processes are used to inform instruction, movement within the multi-level system, and disability identification (in accordance with state law).			
21. Decision Making Process	<p>Describe how decisions are made to move students between levels.</p> <p>Who is involved in decision making?</p> <p>What data are used to inform those decisions, and how are they used?</p> <p>What criteria and guidelines are used for making decisions?</p> <p>Do you have reason to believe that the decision-making process may be subject to bias or inappropriate influence?</p> <p>To what extent are the screening, progress monitoring, and other assessment data used to inform instruction at all levels, including the core instruction?</p> <p>Are consistent decision making rules used with all students?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
<i>Overarching Factors—Factors that relate to the entire RTI framework.</i>			
22. Prevention Focus	<p>To what extent do you believe the teaching staff views the purpose of RTI as primarily to prevent students from having academic and/or behavioral problems?</p> <p>What portion of the teaching staff view RTI as primarily a means for special education identification?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
23. Leadership	<p>To what extent are the school and district administrators aware of the RTI framework at your school?</p> <p>To what extent do the actions taken and decisions made by district administrators improve the effectiveness of the RTI framework at your school?</p> <p>To what extent do the actions taken and decisions made by school administrators improve the effectiveness of the RTI framework at your school?</p> <p>Does your school have a designated person who oversees and manages RTI implementation?</p> <p>If yes, what percentage of that person's time is devoted to overseeing and managing RTI?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
24. Staff Qualifications	<p>Describe the training and qualifications for staff who provide the secondary and tertiary interventions.</p> <p>What ongoing professional development is available to staff who provide secondary and tertiary interventions?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Item	Sample Interview Questions	Comments/Remarks	Ratings
25. Culturally and Linguistically Responsive	What efforts have been made to ensure that core instruction and secondary and tertiary level interventions take into account cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors for students?		① ② ③ ④ ⑤
26. Communications With and Involvement of Parents	<p>Are parents knowledgeable about the RTI framework in your school?</p> <p>How are parents of students at the secondary or tertiary level kept informed of the progress of their child?</p> <p>How are parents involved in decision making regarding the participation of their child in secondary or tertiary levels of prevention?</p>		① ② ③ ④ ⑤

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APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORMS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Interventions with Good Intentions: Effective Implementation of Response to Intervention In Two Rural School Districts

Principal Investigator: Dr. Carl Lashley

Participant's Name: _____

What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The Purpose of this research is to investigate effective practices related to Response to Intervention implementation in school districts.

Why are you asking me?

This school system was identified to demonstrate a progressive Response to Integration implementation process. You were identified to have knowledge about the implementation process-what is working well, what areas/processes have room for growth, etc.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

If you agree to participate in the study, I will ask you to respond orally to questions about RtI implementation in your school. The interview may take about 45 minutes of your time.

Is there any audio/video recording?

I plan to take written notes regarding your responses. I may use an audio recording only if needed to expedite the process. If an audio-tape is used, because your voice will potentially be identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed. Although the researcher will make every effort to limit access to the tape by storing it in a locked file cabinet for a three-year period, there is always a slight possibility of it being heard. After the three-year storage, the audio-tape will be destroyed. The researcher will make every effort to maintain the confidentiality of each respondent.

What are the dangers to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Dr. Carl Lashley who can be reached at 336.334.3745.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

Society may benefit from understanding effective practices in Response to Intervention implementation. Effective RtI implementation can bring about positive academic progress for students. Replication of these effective implementation practices may bring about increased growth for students.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

Small gift cards will be used as compensation for study participants. The study will cost participants only the use of their time.

How will you keep my information confidential?

All information will remain confidential by being stored in a locked cabinet for the required three-year period. After the three-year period of storage, the written documents will be destroyed. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Tina Kissell.

Signature: _____ Date: _____